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Stories of Action Everywhere

Everybody's

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Ared White

T. T. Flynn

J. E. Grinstead

Hugh Pendexter

L. G. Blochman

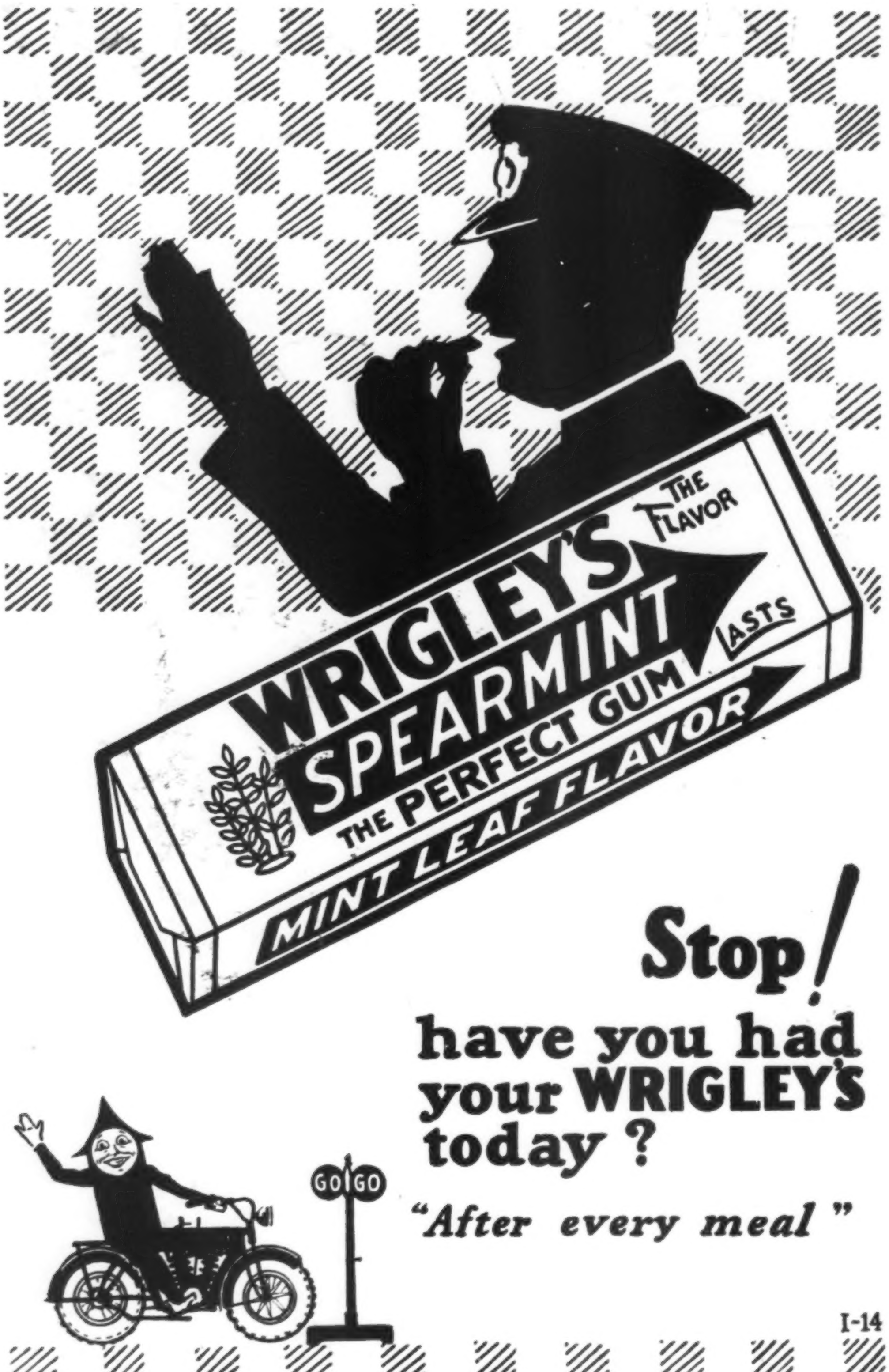
R. E. Hamilton

Beginning

The Secret Lagoon

A New Romance of the South Seas by

BASIL CAREY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March, 1928
Vol. LVIII No. 3

Everybody's

WILLIAM CORCORAN
Editor

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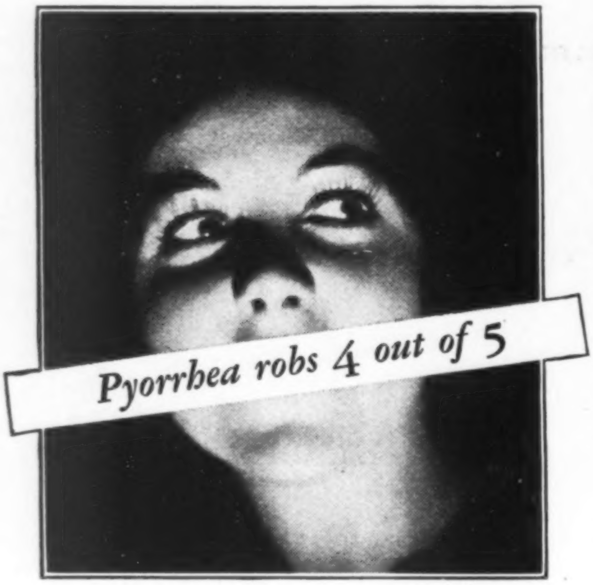
TEETH ARE WHITE

BUT . . .



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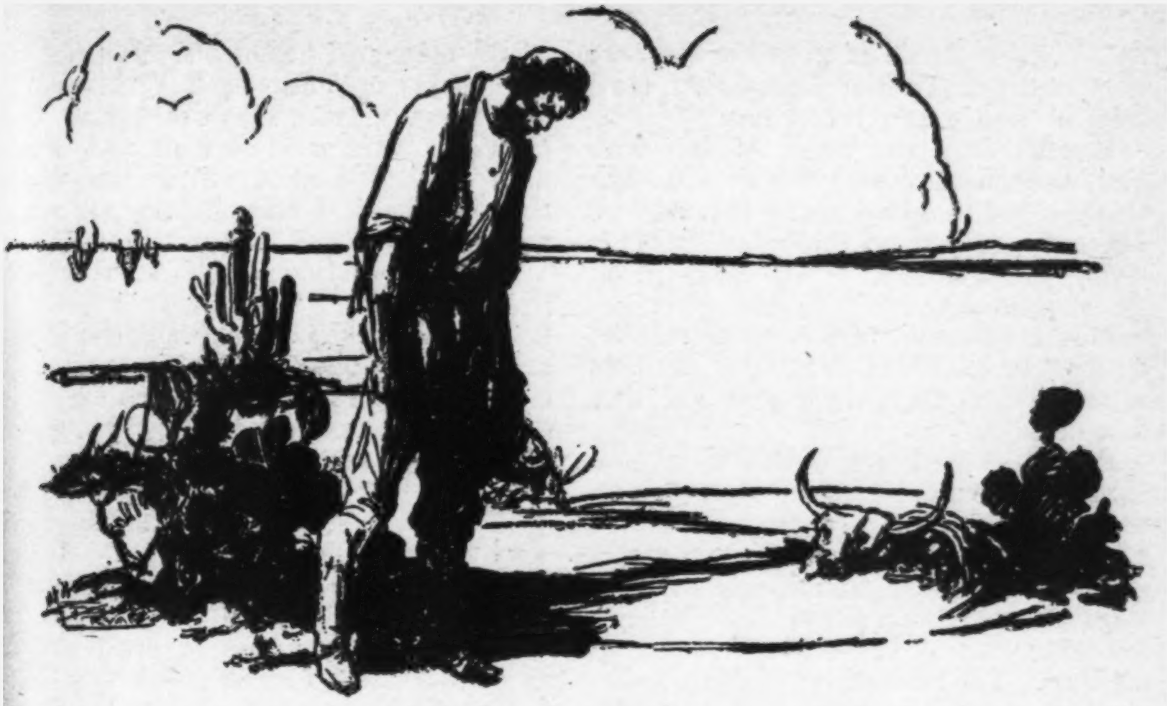


A Tale of the Dread Ordeal of the Desert

Buzzards

By ARED WHITE

This author, who has written some of the best War stories we know, here writes of the West. You will find a word about him in EVERYBODY'S MEETING PLACE

JIM RANDALL raised his gray eyes from the sick pack burro and searched the desert sky anxiously. His face cleared as he completed his scrutiny and he turned to Madras almost cheerfully, in a patent effort to bolster up the other man's dead spirits.

"It's a good sign; a mighty good sign. Madras," said Randall with conviction in his voice. "Not a single buzzard in sight nowhere—and them birds sure can scent a death in the wind fer miles and miles away."

Madras did not look up from the quartzite rock on which he sat, face between his hands, staring moodily, sullenly, into the drab, parched reaches of the desert wastes to the east of them. He had no further ear for Randall's optimistic assurances—Randall's childish willingness to trust their all to mere whims of chance and wait on the questionable recovery of the sick burro. For three days now Madras had been occupied with his own deep, brooding thoughts—thoughts that were crystallizing in his mind towards the moment of action.

"Cheer up, Madras, can't you?" Randall bantered him good-humoredly. "Don't worry but what we're goin' to get out of this with our plunder, even if it takes another week for that poor little jackass to get back on his feed."

"I didn't hire out to feed my bones to no hungry buzzards," Madras snapped back. "You should of pulled out of here the first day that critter showed sick. We'd been in Tooele long before now."

Randall fixed the sullen Madras with cool, untroubled eyes. "In a game like this you got to take a man's chances," he asserted with pointed emphasis. "Ain't I giving you a quarter of the clean-up, on top of your wages?"

Madras sneered. "Lot of good it'll ever do me," he grumbled, "if I stick out here with you 'till the water's gone and that burro croaks."

Randall looked again, closely, at the hardy pack animal that had gone sick on them, unaccountably, at the very time they were ready to load their precious cargo of gold ore, water and rations, and start the long, hot trek back across Skull Valley's scorching miles to where civilization bloomed. The burro stood beside a scraggly sage clumpet with its head just clear of the ground, its long ears sagging listlessly, its legs spread apart against the threat of collapse. A few moments ago it had nibbled half-heartedly at its ration of grain, the first food it had eaten in three days. One of its long ears lifted a fraction of an inch as Randall looked now, another hopeful sign to his desert-nurtured mind.

"Ah, quit whimperin'," he charged Madras, more abruptly. "That critter is perkin' up. When a burro can wiggle its ear, it's on the mend. Everything'll come out right if you just keep your nerve."

"Yes, everything'll come out all right," Madras mocked querulously, jumping to his feet and walking testily back and forth. "That's all I ever hear outa you, Randall. And then you go right on sittin' here—wastin' good water on that mule." He paused to glare malevolently at Randall, his eyes falling away quickly before the other's level gaze. "But when that mule's dead—how we goin' to get that gold ore out!" he demanded. "When the water's gone—how do we get out!"

"We can hide the ore out if worst comes to worst and the mule can't pack it; and they'll be water enough left to last us into town, even if we wait here several days more," replied Randall crisply.

"Me—I'm not leavin' my quarter of the clean-up here," roared Madras, resuming his irritated pacing.

"Buck up, I tell you," Randall said whole-heartedly, putting aside the infection of the other's ill humor and asserting his own simple optimism again. "I been in this desert a lot. They's a saying that the Lord takes care of fools and drunk men," he half laughed. "We come under that first head, I reckon. So, someway, we'll come out O. K. with our stuff."

Madras cast another quick, withering look at Randall. "I allus hear it that the Lord helps them as helps themselves," he said, a queer, disagreeable, menacing note in his voice. Then he sat down again on the rock, with a muttered oath, and dropped his head into his hands.

FOR several moments Randall stood looking at him thoughtfully. He did not like the shifty light that had been growing in Madras's little black eyes of late. There was a sinister, evasive look about Madras's thin face today that baffled him and aroused vague, warning intuitions deep within.

These three days past there had been an inescapable hint of dark omen in Madras's manner—ever since the burro went off its feed. An uneasy feeling had stirred Randall at times, as Madras sat wrapped in his endless deep brooding; a confirmation of the suspicion of the man that had come to him on the way out here a month ago, when he caught Madras lashing the weary burro with a knotted lead rope.

He had not picked Madras up casually for this expedition. Instead he had selected him deliberately, measuring him carefully among the available muckers at Tooele who were willing to brave the desert fastnesses for a consideration. A small man, Madras, with thin, firm lips, small, deep-set black eyes and a body that was spare, erect and sinewy, he had impressed Randall as the one who would go through.

It was the incident of the knotted lead rope on the way out that first raised Randall's doubts. Not about Madras's endurance and tenacity, but of those qualities that go to make a man. He had his own hard judgment of a man who would mercilessly beat a willing and unoffending pack burro. It was by such acts as this that men betrayed their real inner souls out in the desert. But when the long hard quest of the ore pocket had developed into a glorious reality, Madras had responded with a feverish vigor, his whole nature becoming vibrant with good humor and energy which the hot sun and the hard life did not drain. So Randall had begun to raise his opinion of the man, to feel that he might be real inside.

Then, with the tragedy of the sick burro, Madras had revealed the worst, had confirmed every suspicion of the meanness of his nature that his mistreatment of the burro had disclosed to the observant Randall. At the very first hint of disaster Madras had begun to fret and rave, a condition that grew speedily into a panic of greedy fear—fear of being forced to leave behind the ore from the rich pocket, a fear that seemed almost to outweigh his fear of death in the desert. Only Randall's calm, cool will, backed by his knotted, superior strength of arms and brawn had held in check Madras's clamorous insistence that they load their wealth upon the sick burro and bolt for it across the desert while the animal yet had life enough to make the start.

Randall put aside his suspicion of Madras again and turned to stir the evening ration of doughgobs and coffee. He smiled grimly as he did this, caught by the whimsical thought that they might be dining on the very best that the very best hotel had to offer—if they were only back a mere hundred and fifty miles where such things existed.

Forty thousand in clean gold was Randall's estimate of the cleanup they had made. Every ounce of it they had dry-mined from the rich rose-quartz that they had crushed by hand with crude mallets. The richest rock, heavily matted with free-milling gold from the pocket, they had sacked without crushing, so that their haul weighed close to a hundred pounds. Too much for the back of one man, or even two, to carry across the scorching reaches of Skull Valley, where water must be carried, and food. Even with the hardy little pack burro back on its feed, they would need to share the load.

Jim Randall's faith in a way out had never wavered once through the three long days of their delay in making the start out of the desert. He had seen the water supply sinking towards the danger point without undue uneasiness. Not that he minimized the dangers of the desert regions. For ten years he had been moving back and forth across them, prospecting the frowning, rocky ranges that skirt the forlorn wasted reaches of southwestern Utah and upper Nevada.

Often the desert had threatened him with its inquisitions. But always he had slipped away from its maws before his water-bags were empty. Once the desert had turned upon him with its savage threat in the very hour he thought he had conquered it. That was a year ago when he came upon this rich ore pocket that just now had laid its riches in his lap. A bit of flying rock from a powder blast had cut a small jagged hole in his water-bags—his one safe passport to and from this barren realm of alkali wastes and burning daylight. So he had been forced to flee, leaving fortune behind untouched. But not once had his prospector's faith deserted him as he worked through long months in the mines at Ophir to earn the stake for this new expedition. Not once did his faith waver now in this new menace of the sick burro and the lowering water supply.

The two men ate their supper in silence, Madras taking his food to one side and brooding over it as he ate. Whatever his gloomy thoughts were he chose to keep them carefully to himself. Randall was on the point of another attempt at rallying him from his depression when his own eyes caught a sudden disconcerting sight. With the first stir of misgivings he saw a buzzard in the air, high above them, soaring circumspectly as if on reconnoissance. He looked sharply at Madras and was well satisfied that the other's eyes were fixed upon the ground so that he did not see the omen.

When the hot sun slipped behind the purple hills in the distant west, Randall turned to his blankets with the shadow of a new decision shaping itself in his mind.

"If that burro ain't better in the morning," he informed Madras, "I reckon maybe we better figger on makin' a start—maybe a short easy start. Better turn in early, Madras, and get plenty of rest. You will need everything you got crossing out o' this God-forsaken country."

Madras merely groaned, without looking up; a strange, uncanny sound that half startled Randall. He lay awake for some time, an uneasy intuition upon him; then dismissed the thought and turned his face resolutely away from the light of the golden crescent moon that now flooded the fastnesses with its ghostly gray light. He was soon asleep.

II

RANDALL became conscious for a fleeting instant of a staggering flash of light that seemed to carry a bolt of lightning in its wake. It was followed by myriad white-hot darts of tiny flames that played against his temples and shot through his brain, torturing him mercilessly while he lay helpless to cry out or drive them away. He hovered for a long time in that intangible borderland that lies between consciousness and coma, struggling vainly to free himself from the damning torment and regain his reason.

Presently, for the briefest instant, the fire in his brain lifted and he had a glimpse of the crescent moon, now turned silver, and of a million tiny white lights overhead. There was a vague, fleeting impression of a dark figure moving in the dim light against the red embers of the campfire. Then his mind became blank.

He awoke to a hot burning in his eyes. He opened his eyes and closed them again before the sharp rays of the morning sun. Slowly his head cleared and he shaded his eyes with his hand and opened them again. The thought came to him that he had overslept. The sun was high in the heavens. He half rose, only to be stricken by the pain in his head. His hand went to his temple. His head was sore and matted and wet. He looked at his hand. There was blood on it.

Randall sprang unsteadily to his feet, impelled by the sudden realization of dire tragedy. He looked about dazedly, his fears confirmed swiftly by what he saw. The pack burro was gone, and the packs—and Madras. He turned feverishly to his bed and jerked back his blankets. The two bags of gold ore were missing.

As the whole tragedy unfolded itself before him Randall smiled grimly. The secret of Madras's days of brooding complaint was now all too clear. Madras had been nursing the grisly temptation that finally had mastered him. He had turned an assassin's hand upon Randall in the night and set out with the sick burro, the water-bags, the remaining food supplies—and the golden treasure they had found.

Only one flaw had marred his murderous plans. The treacherous shot in the dark had missed a vital spot. Randall felt of his head carefully. The pain was excruciating and he was weakened by loss of blood. But he assured himself that it was nothing more than a severe scalp wound. The .38 caliber slug had hit a glancing blow and merely stunned its victim.

"The low buzzard!" muttered Randall between his drawn lips. "It's just like a man that'll beat up on a burro. I should of knowed——"

Randall, steadied by sense of his now desperate situation, made a deliberate survey of his problem. He checked over the remnant of Madras's effects and of the packs. Again his worst fears were confirmed. Not a drop of water! The discovery seemed to awaken an insistent thirst in his dry throat. Yesterday, he had given half of his own ration of water to the sick burro and gone without the liquid that he now sorely needed. The last bit of food had been carted away, too. Madras must have loaded the burro and his own back to the breaking point for the hard dash out.

Randall sat down with forced deliberation, mastering with an effort the mad fears that pounded in his brain. This was no time for panic. The pain in his head ceased to bother him. Twenty-five miles a day—six days of it—over blistering rocky hills and alkali desert, treeless and waterless, between him and the nearest tangible civilization at Tooele on the edge of the wastelands. An impossible struggle. Nothing short of a miracle could save him.

"Too bad the damn buzzard wasn't a better shot," Randall mused aloud, smiling his mastery of the panic that had been tugging to overwhelm him.

He saw the coffeepot standing on the charred embers of the campfire and went to it slowly, not daring to hope that it contained liquid. His heart leaped with joy when he saw that it held a full pint of stale, cold coffee. He got some dry sage snags and built a fire under the pot. A few gills of hot coffee put new strength in his veins. He poured the remainder of it very carefully into an empty vinegar bottle, corked it and tied the priceless bottle to his body, inside his shirt. Then he drew his belt tight and turned his footsteps out onto the trail.

From the tracks in the sand, Randall read that Madras had marched ahead of the burro. The hoofprints told him that the sick animal walked with its feet spread apart as if heavily laden, barely able to stand. Madras had left in a hurry, his footprints showing thirty-inch strides of his squatty legs, the toes digging into the sand at each step as if from tugging hard at the lead rope.

The scorching desert sun beat down mercilessly on Randall as he followed the trail doggedly on and on through the sweltering day. At first he took up a terrific walking gait—nearly five miles an hour, just short of a dog-trot. There was the chance that by hurrying thus he might overtake the slower Madras before the monsters of thirst and hunger struck a vital blow.

Each time that he came to a broad level stretch of lifeless sand or to a rocky rise in the terrain, Randall paused and strained his eyes into the shimmering distance for some sight of the fugitive. But he saw no trace of living thing. Madras must have set forth early the night before and pressed on madly through the heat of the day, goaded by fear and panic.

BY LATE afternoon, Randall had slowed down his killing pace to three miles an hour, the feverish burning of his throat adding to the torture of his now throbbing head and warning him to hoard his reserve of energy. Hunger was gnawing at his stomach. He had to fight a growing desire to lie down in the shelter of a sage bush and await the cooling of the white furnace about him. Only a determination to overtake Madras drove him on and on. He must use his superior desert craft, endurance and length of legs to catch up with Madras and seize his share of water and food.

Through the long twilight and the first hours of darkness he resumed the faster gait. As darkness came he began to strain his eyes again for glimpse of a fire. But Madras had not stopped to light a fire. The tracks that he left behind showed that same long even stride, with the toes dug into the sand from leading the sick burro.

Late at night, Randall stopped to build a fire. He heated the precious remnant of the coffee. There was less than a cup of the liquid left. Heating it would add to its strength. He took care not to warm the liquid too long, lest some of the priceless substance evaporate. When it was ready it took all his strength to guard against consuming it all at a few greedy gulps. A single swallow was all he must allow himself. A swallow—and his fevered body cried out for quarts of liquid. He jerked the bottle from his lips with an effort after he had taken a small mouthful, worked the coffee about in his mouth a long time, and swallowed it. He stood looking with ravenous eyes at the remnant. His body insistently demanded what was left of the coffee. But his reason told him that life or death lay in those few gills of brown liquid. Only by drinking it a swallow at a time, giving himself just enough to keep himself alive, could he hope to make his way on.

At times during the night he lay down to rest. Once he fell asleep, exhausted, and woke up just as dawn was breaking. He got to his feet and hurried on at his five-mile an hour clip against the rising of the sun. When the sun mounted the heavens again he slowed down to three and a half miles an hour. Then to two and a half, involuntarily. He was getting weaker from lack of food and water, and the loss of blood. He stumbled over a snag, and nearly fell. The experience shocked him. His strength must not fail him now.

Hour after hour he forced himself on. The fever of thirst had risen in his blood. He began to see crystal streams of cold, clean water just ahead of him and caught hold of himself again lest he succumb to the delusions of thirst and lie down to die.

A new struggle rose in him. A struggle to preserve the life-giving remnant of his coffee. His hand went involuntarily, time after time, under his shirt to the precious bottle. Each time he forced his hand back to his side. Not until the sun went down must he put another swallow of liquid into his fevered body. The struggle to preserve the coffee took his mind off the effort of walking. That and the gnawing pangs of hunger in his stomach.

Directly in his track he became conscious of a hideous buzzing. His jagged senses brought him to a sharp halt. As he realized the danger before him, Randall stopped with a shudder at the large coiled rattler in his trail, and circled away from the snake.

Then a new thought flashed into his mind. His eyes narrowed and a strange glow rose in them as he stood regarding the repulsive thing. He made to get a stout sage snag, then paused cautiously. No, it would not do to goad the rattler with a club. It might, in its frenzy of rage, fasten its poisonous fangs into its own body and fill its tissues with venom. He took out his pistol and pointed it at the snake. His hand shook so from weakness that he could not aim. Then he lay down, crawled close to the reptile, steadied his weapon against the ground and fired.

With his knife, Randall severed the rattler's head well below the poison sac behind its jaws. He stripped off the hideously mottled skin, hastily built a fire of sage snags and roasted the white carcass over the coals. He ate the meat ravenously in a few uncontrollable gulps.

He moved off again at once, increasing his gait slightly in the thought that the snake would add a few ounces of energy to his sagging reserve of strength. A splitting pain rose in his head, and a feeling of acute nausea. He fought off the sickness grimly. It would only weaken him later to yield to the revolt of his stomach—and he knew that the nausea came from bolting the food into his empty stomach and not from poison in the snake.

The fever of thirst was rising swiftly in his veins, to the breaking point, and with it came a fierce struggle—a struggle against the desperate folly of draining the remnant of his coffee. The craving to drink grew to an irresistible lust. He fought it finally to the end of his will power, fought it until the demands of his throbbing body overcame his reason. With a sudden frantic movement he brought forth the bottle and drank all but a few dregs of the liquid. He stood regarding what was left for a halting moment, then raised the bottle to his lips impulsively and drained it. With an oath he cast the empty bottle from him and moved ahead.

INVOLUNTARILY, as he walked, he looked into the sky now, long and searchingly, for the omen of telltale buzzards. The thought that he was without liquid brought those birds to his mind. The sky about him was clear of life. A fleeting moment of satisfaction spurred him at this discovery. His belief was absolute in the unerring instinct of those carrion scavengers of the desert to ferret out their victims long before death actually came. It must be, he thought, that his own end was not in sight, that he yet had a fighting chance.

At dusk Randall fell on his face to rest. Falling saved him the conscious effort of lying down. For an hour he lay still, fighting off sleep lest he waste precious hours of the cooler darkness by sleeping the night through. His jaded body responded in time to the morsel of food and the few swallows of liquid—the last liquid between him and death in the desert. It came to him that tonight he must make his supreme effort. Tonight he must overtake Madras—or perhaps never.

He got up in a frenzy of sudden fear and moved on, hugging the trail in the sand relentlessly. Again he came to a sharp rise that commanded the distance, and halted to search for a light in the shadowy gray void. But again there was no beacon. So far, if Madras had halted at all for more than a few moments, he had done so without building a fire.

As the night wore on Randall began falling asleep on his feet. A heavy, jolting stumble forward, over nothing, would recall him to his senses. His jaded body and fevered brain fought endlessly for the surcease of unconsciousness. Something in his conscious mind, a vital spark, an instinct of survival, kept him fighting, clinging to a thin hair of reason that alone sustained him in the terrific struggle.

It became harder and harder for him to keep awake. He was falling asleep on his feet now every few yards. There were no longer a dozen paces between stumbles. He tried to rally himself, to tell himself that if he went down he would only lie there to lose precious, cool hours. Perhaps until the sun came up.

The sun! Thought of it struck him with a pang of dumb terror. Tomorrow's sun loomed before him like a thing of certain doom. It would bring with it new tortures of thirst—thirst against which he now would be helpless. No reserve of liquid was in the bottle to give him courage. No life-giving swallow at the end of the day to allay for a moment the burning fires in his body.

He stumbled and fell, lay on his face for a moment fighting the monster of fatigue. Fatigue — hunger — thirst. They had centered their attacks upon him, each of them clawing and gnawing, clinging to his body with their crushing weight, encircling his brain with a crushing hot band. The spark of reason burned at low ebb, but it did not die. He drew himself painfully to one knee, then with a supreme effort staggered to his feet and moved on.

Again he stumbled and fell and there was a greater struggle to get up. He fell a third and a fourth time. Each time he forced himself to his feet, still fighting relentlessly against the insistent clamor of his body for rest.

Suddenly he became erect, easily, with the sure effort of a strong man. Thirst, hunger, fatigue, released their clutches upon him. He revived mysteriously, his brain cleared. Unsuspected resources of energy came to his succor. Before him, and not a mile away, glowed the coals of a small brush fire. Water—food—Madras!

The next moment he sagged in a reaction of weakness, but pulled himself together with less of an effort and kept to his course. He remembered to use caution. As he came closer to the spot he drew his pistol and eased a cartridge from the magazine into the barrel. Not that he felt any lust to kill Madras. But he must make certain that Madras did not shoot him—did not run away from him again with water—food.

He crawled the last two hundred yards to the fire. From time to time he lay flat on his stomach to rest, no longer fearful that he would go to sleep. Water was within reach, water to quench the fires that were burning within him like the white flames of a blast furnace. And after that, food. He became fearful that the thump-thump-thump of his pounding heart might sound the alarm. It seemed incredible that his heart could beat thus and not be heard.

As he went crawling to the fire, cautiously keeping a sage clumpet between him and his quarry, he put his feeble reserve into a lunge that carried him to his feet. Then he staggered into the camp, pistol in hand.

"I got you covered, Madras—you damn buzzard!" he warned the other thickly.

There was no response. Randall's shaking hand involuntarily pressed the trigger and there was an explosion as a bullet scattered the red embers of the dying fire.

"Talk up, Madras—or the next shot goes through you," he tried to shout, although the voice that came from behind his swollen tongue was little more than a hoarse whisper.

There was no sound or movement. Randall held himself on his feet while he looked closely at the fire and examined every nearby clumpet. It was a dead camp. Madras was gone. The burro was gone. Nothing left but the dying embers of the fire.

WITH a groan, Randall staggered on. Madras might have gone hours before. Or he might have left only a few minutes ago. Madras—less than half the man that he was in endurance. Madras, the mucker and transient, out-distancing him in his own domain! The thought maddened him. Madras could not keep ahead of him forever. He began stumbling again, and pitching to his face in the sand. It was harder to get to his feet. At times the exertion of getting up exhausted his ebbing strength and he would flounder back into the sand at the end of a single step. But Madras could not distance him forever. The thought came burning in his mind. He would——

His eyes opened again into the burning sun. He closed them and lay half conscious until memory of his plight goaded him into sudden frantic wakefulness. He staggered to his feet. His legs were less unsteady under him. The sun was half way to the zenith. He must have lain for hours where he last fell. His body had stored up new resources out of the sleep and the carcass of the snake and the few mouthfuls of coffee. As he moved off, the stiffness worked out of his joints. He was not hungry. This seemed strange to him. But his tongue was thick and heavy in his mouth and his throat burned like a hot coal when he tried to swallow.

His strength was short-lived. Before he had covered a mile he commenced to stumble again. His tongue became a large hot stone in his parched mouth. The sun tormented him with the cruel intensity of an acetylene torch, held closer and closer to his suffering body. His body was wrung stone dry and he no longer perspired. The discovery stung him with maddening terror.

About him springs began to well invitingly from the gray alkali wastes. Streams, shaded by thickets of green-leafed willow, bubbled their invitation to him. Once he half turned from his course to cast himself in the water and drink. Then he caught himself and clung to the remnant of his reason. Once he gave way to those hallucinations of the desert he would be doomed. Once the remnant of his tortured mind deserted him he would spend the last few hours digging in the sand, sucking alkali into his lungs, until death mercifully claimed him.

Through the afternoon he hung with a desperate, instinctive tenacity to the thin thread of his reason. Every fiber of his physical being cried out now against going on past those wooded oases. At times he would remember to pull himself together and scan the distances dazedly for some sight of Madras. The area ahead was forever barren except for sage, glistening alkali flats and the endless trail on the ground that lured him on and on like a will-o'-the-wisp.

Randall opened his eyes again into the glare of the sun. He must have fallen backwards and lain a long time after the thin thread of reason last broke. He saw through his daze that the sun was far to the west now. It would soon be dark again. His lips were split and bleeding from the alkali burns. He tried to moisten them with his tongue. His tongue was hard and uncontrollable. He could not move it. It was as if someone had gagged him with a choking wedge of steel.

He lay a long time trying to rally strength enough to get up and move on. His nerves no longer responded to the goad of frenzy. Only a heroic holding onto that thread of reason kept him from closing his eyes again. He saw small black specks in the air. It came to him vaguely that they were buzzards. The thought did not frighten him. It was only natural.

The smouldering spark of reason worked a swift miracle. It told him suddenly that those birds were flying not over his head but off there in the distance. It was not him they were waiting on. It was Madras—Madras in distress. His spent body responded with another miracle, a miracle of hidden strength that welled up from deep within and took him to his feet. The buzzards were flying low. That meant their prey must have fallen. Otherwise the cowardly jackals of the skies would not have ventured out of the heights. He stumbled on, carried by the magical vision of water. No thought of the gold ore came to his mind. He had forgotten it, forgotten even Madras's hideous crime against him. There was one thought burning in his mind, feeding the last embers of his strength into the struggle—water!

The buzzards suddenly mounted high into the sky as Randall came up. He made out a dark object lying on the ground. It urged him to a sudden burst of speed. He lost his balance as he lunged forward and fell on his face. For a long time he lay there, until he could muster the strength to stir. He could not make his feet again. Only by a supreme effort was he able to crawl. Foot by foot he made his way to the dark object. It was the burro—dead. Madras was gone.

On the burro's pack was one of the water bags. Randall reached for it with unsteady hand. There was water in it—a pint, perhaps, or less. It seemed hours before he was able to extract the cork stopper and raise the bag to his swollen lips. Some of the precious water ran down his chin and was lost. Drop by drop he drained the contents of the bag. It was like pouring water on hot stones. It seemed to sear his mouth and throat as he forced it down. When the last of it was gone he sank back and slept.

THE sun was still in his eyes when he opened them again. He blinked uncomprehendingly for a moment. Then he saw that the sun was rising in the east. He had slept the precious night away in his utter exhaustion.

His mind was clearer now and the thread of reason stronger. He was able to get to his feet. His first thought was of water. His tongue was easier in his mouth. He was not hungry; he had ceased to feel hunger; but his body cried for water. He lifted the water bag. It was empty. He cursed the folly that had let him drain it.

He got to his feet and searched the pack. Their other water bag was gone. Madras had taken it with him. He fought off a panic and made a new survey of the situation now that his mind was something more than an intermittent spark. He made out that Madras had loaded himself with the other water bag, the food—and the bags of gold. More than a hundred pounds. A crushing weight which the strongest man could not carry far under that sun, even when fortified by food and water.

Randall took bearings. He estimated that it was forty miles further to Tooele—perhaps a few miles more or a few miles less. Two days travel for a man with a burro—and provisions and water. An endless trail for a man in his condition.

A tin can lay on the ground, the only sign of food. It had contained beans. Madras had eaten the contents. There were a few beans clinging to the sides of the can and in the bottom. Randall was not hungry. His stomach had ceased to exist, strangely enough. But he knew he must nurture what strength he had left for the supreme effort. He scraped the few beans together and swallowed them. Forty miles, miles of endless torment through the blazing sun, on half a dozen beans.

A feeling of hopelessness swept him as he looked into the distance. It came to him that he could not make it—without water, without food, without rest. He searched the pack again and started on, cutting a new hole in his belt and cinching in his pinched sides as if to hold himself together. Forty miles—an hour by auto or train. He thought of how often he had walked forty miles between dawn and dark of a single day. He assured himself that he could make it. He must hold onto his reason and keep on and on in a supreme effort. He had had water last night. His body would not pass out on him today. Forty miles and he could drink, drink endlessly. There would be more water than he could drink, cool water that he could pour on his head and wrists and forever quench the fires that burned within him.

At midday he was stumbling again from weakness. The burning in his throat and lungs had become intolerable. He crawled into the scant shade of a sagebrush and lay there until night. Then he moved off, alternately stumbling ahead a few paces when he could gain his feet, crawling at times when his legs refused to support him.

The sun awakened him again. In the moments of full reason that followed long sleep he was able to take his bearings. He looked back whence he had come, trying to calculate the distance. Ten miles, he concluded with an agonized groan. Ten miles in a day and night of effort. He was lost. He could not hold out for four such days. And the best of his strength had gone into those ten miles.

He gained his feet, trying to tell himself that he had been mistaken—that he had come thirty miles—and there was only ten miles to go. He remembered Madras and looked about again. Madras with that crushing weight of gold and water and food on his shoulders. Madras could not make it. He looked about again for telltale buzzards—buzzards that would tell him where he might find Madras and the other waterbag. There was no sign of life in the endless reaches about him, not even a buzzard in the air.

Through the heat of the day he forgot all else in the fight to hold onto the thread of reason. Those treacherous lakes and shady fastnesses were dogging his path again. He kept on his course all day without sleeping. He was making most of his progress on his hands and knees now. It took too much of his strength to climb to his feet each time he fell.

The sun in his eyes awakened him again, or rather it stirred him into a half rational, fevered delirium. The thread of reason was a mere thin hair. There lay the haunting mirage lake again before his eyes. His heart was pumping liquid fire through his brain. One tangible thing reached his reason. He saw buzzards in the air.

They were circling over him now, high in the air but directly overhead. There was no mistaking their intent. He moved off on his hands and knees, resting every few seconds, fighting down an impulse to bury his head in a cooling lake, or dig with his fingers at tiny springs that sprang up out of the earth every few feet.

Those birds in the air were real. There was no escaping that fact. In rational moments he discerned that they had settled lower. They were flying now at an altitude of a hundred yards, dropping with devilish instinct lower, foot by foot, as his life ebbed away.

Once his mind cleared with a start as an ominous black shadow flitted across his face. A buzzard had come close on as if to sense the nearness of death. There must be little life left. Soon he would be dead, a luscious morsel for those long sharp, curved beaks—food for the sinews of those uncanny black wings that they might flap their way over the fastnesses in search of tomorrow's prey.

The thought drove him to a fresh effort at movement. It was little more than a spasm. Again and again he tried to crawl. Each time he fell back, his face in the sand. His head throbbed now as if his skull was being beaten in by a sledge. He lapsed into the strange borderland that lies between consciousness and unconsciousness, between life and death.

Out of the shadowy, shapeless phantoms that beset him there, he became conscious of a huge buzzard hard upon him. He felt its greedy beak tearing at his shoulders. Another and another buzzard—tearing him to shreds, carrying him away. It was the end. He tried to cry out, to fight——

III

RANDALL opened his eyes into the blinding sun. Only it was not tormenting him now with its white hot rays. There was a cooling breeze blowing across his face. He tried to gather the tangled threads of his reason. But his sensations were of the borderland. It came to him that he was out of his head. His feeling was that of rushing wildly through space. The sky was swirling overhead in a dizzy sort of way. He must be lying there in the desert delirious. He looked for the buzzards. They were gone. He closed his eyes again and tried to think.

The reality of his sensations stirred him. The feeling of swift movement through space persisted. The cooling rush of air on his temples seemed real. It was not like the sensation of those phantom streams and lakes. It seemed to have substance, reality, to soothe his burning body.

He felt a strange sort of nausea as if the world were dropping away from under him. His body seemed to be careening this way and that through space. Always there was a strange roaring in his ears as of the desert wind whining through a dozen taut telegraph wires. Presently he felt himself jolted strangely, the sense of motion ceased, and a moment later he saw a human face bending over him. The face was topped with a heavy leather cap and the eyes were shut in by heavy goggles. The reality, the joyous reality of it, came to him slowly.

Randall was lifted from the cockpit of the airplane by careful hands and carried into the cool shade of a building. He recognized the place as he was taken inside. It was the hotel at Tooele. They plied him with cooling liquid, a few sips at a time and gave him small portions of warm nourishing soup, ministrations which only stirred the burning thirst in his throat and set his dead stomach back into an acute craving for food. He tried to cry out for more, then remembered why they must give him food a little at a time just now.

"But think of them poor buzzards," the airman smiled down at him consolingly. "I snatched their supper away from them just as they had their appetites all whetted. Another hour, though, and I fear you——"

Randall shuddered convulsively as the memory rose of those buzzards hovering close above him in the desert, waiting for the last throb of his ebbing life. Then he looked up and smiled his gratitude to his rescuer.

"Anyhow if it hadn't been for the buzzards you'd be out there yet," the pilot went on. "I saw them swirling low and—I don't know why—something told me to drop down and see what it was all about. I guess I wanted to give those birds a surprise. And I got one myself when I saw a man lying there. I circled low, twice, and might have moved on if I hadn't seen you move. It was level and clear for a landing."

The pilot broke off into a carefree laugh. "You should have seen those buzzards scatter when I dropped in on them," he exclaimed. "I was close enough to one big red-eyed fellow to see his eyes. It looked like he left with disgust in his face, wondering what kind of a supervulture it was swooping in there to rob him of his find."

A question framed itself slowly on Randall's purple lips. The mad demand of his body for nourishment was subsiding. His clearing mind reverted to the tragedy in the desert.

"How far out was I from town—when you—?" he managed to ask with great effort, his eyes lighting up with a hungry interest.

"Something like fifteen miles from here," replied the airman, wondering at the other's intent interest in such a detail. "But it might as well have been fifteen hundred in the condition I found you in."

Randall pondered the reply with staring eyes for several moments. Fifteen miles. Then the treacherous Madras had made it in. And even now he must be on a fast train making good his final escape with their treasure. He half rose, intent on sounding a warning. But he was too weak, too far gone just now to fight further. He turned his head slowly away from the sunlight that came in through the open window and dropped off into the sleep of exhaustion.

WHEN he had his voice the next day, and lay propped up in bed with the first stirrings of returning strength coursing through him, Randall made calm inquiry. No, Madras had not been seen in Tooele. So it must be that the fellow had sneaked in at night and skulked on out of town again, leaving no trail behind him.

He forced a smile to his face, a wan smile. There was no gnawing bitterness in his soul. He was a man to take his losses standing up, smiling at Fate. It came to him that his thought should be only one of gratitude for the miracle of his rescue from the scorching desert.

"I guess there's something in that saying that the Lord takes care of fools and the like," he said to himself, gently.

His eyes were on the desert to the west, whence he had come. The sight out the window did not repel him. The desert seemed almost to be inviting him to try again for its elusive treasure. "Some day, when I've earned another grubstake," he mused half aloud, "I'll go back out there and find another rich pocket — one that——"

He broke off and shaded his blinking eyes while his pulse rose. The rays of the slanting desert sun were in his eyes. Were those sun-spots from the glare—or tiny black specks that really existed far out there in the distance. The spectacle persisted.

Loungers in the hotel saw a tall thin man, half staggering from weakness, his only attire a sheet thrown about his body, make his way into the one street of Tooele. He pushed aside those who tried to intercept him from leaving in a delirium. Out in the street he hailed a ranch team and told the rancher to drive him to the west.

"You're outa your head, Jim," the rancher reasoned with him. "You can't run 'round this way."

"Out where them buzzards is circling!" commanded Randall pointing to the west. "Something tells me them buzzards——"

The cowardly buzzards went swirling away into the distance as the team approached. Under them, stark and black in the sand lay Madras, the last embers of life gone from him hours before. His face was buried deep in a phantom lake of the desert and his fingers were black stumps from digging in mocking springs. On his back was secured the crushing weight of the canvas bullion bags. He had strapped and knotted them to his body against the fear of losing them or tossing them aside in delirium.

Randall stood looking at the stricken hulk in understanding horror. Except for a miracle he would be lying thus fifteen miles farther out in the desert—food for buzzards.

"What happened, Jim?" the rancher asked him. "I thought Madras went out with you to prospect?"

For some moments Randall stood in silence, as if debating the question. "Madras was dead set on bringin' in them bags—for me," he said simply. He sat musing while the rancher loaded the ore bags and the body into the buckboard. As they drove off, leaving the gray void to the things of the air, he spoke again, enigmatically, as if voicing aloud to himself his own somber thoughts.

"I guess there's something in it that the Lord looks after simple folks," he said. "But he doesn't seem to care much what happens to—buzzards."

With "To the Colors," in the next issue, Ared White takes us back to the days when the terrible little brown men rose against American garrisons in the Philippines.

Beginning *The Secret* LAGOON

By
BASIL CAREY

CHAPTER I

KNIFE SCARS

"STEWART'S dead, then?"

"Dead and gone to hell."

Carver grinned. "I'll bet the inhabitants are regretting his acquaintance right now," he said. "Don't you reckon they are?"

"Tell you," said McGinty, "there's plenty in the Islands are regrettin' that Stewart's gone. Most of the crimes for the last ten years have been blamed on him. He had a hand in a good many, but not all of 'em."

Carver's eyelids flickered. "Meaning—anything in particular?"

"Yes. I was thinking of the *Violetta*. Remember her? She belonged to Mason. She was found driftin', south of Mowawi. They picked up Mason's body a week after. He'd been shot. They said that was Stewart's work. Well, it wasn't."

"How do you know?" demanded Carver.

"Because Hennessey says he was in Wakatea at the time."

McGinty grunted. He shifted his squat body into an easier position and spat thoughtfully. There was envy in his deep-set eyes as he surveyed Carver's lean form. He wiped his neck with a yellow cotton handkerchief, which he spread on the sand to dry.

"You'd think twenty-three years in these parts would have sweated me to what the gals call an elegant figure," he remarked sadly. "Look at you. You're like a dried pea-pod. And me—I put on a layer of fat every time I chew. Why is it? Answer me that, you hook-nosed six-footer."

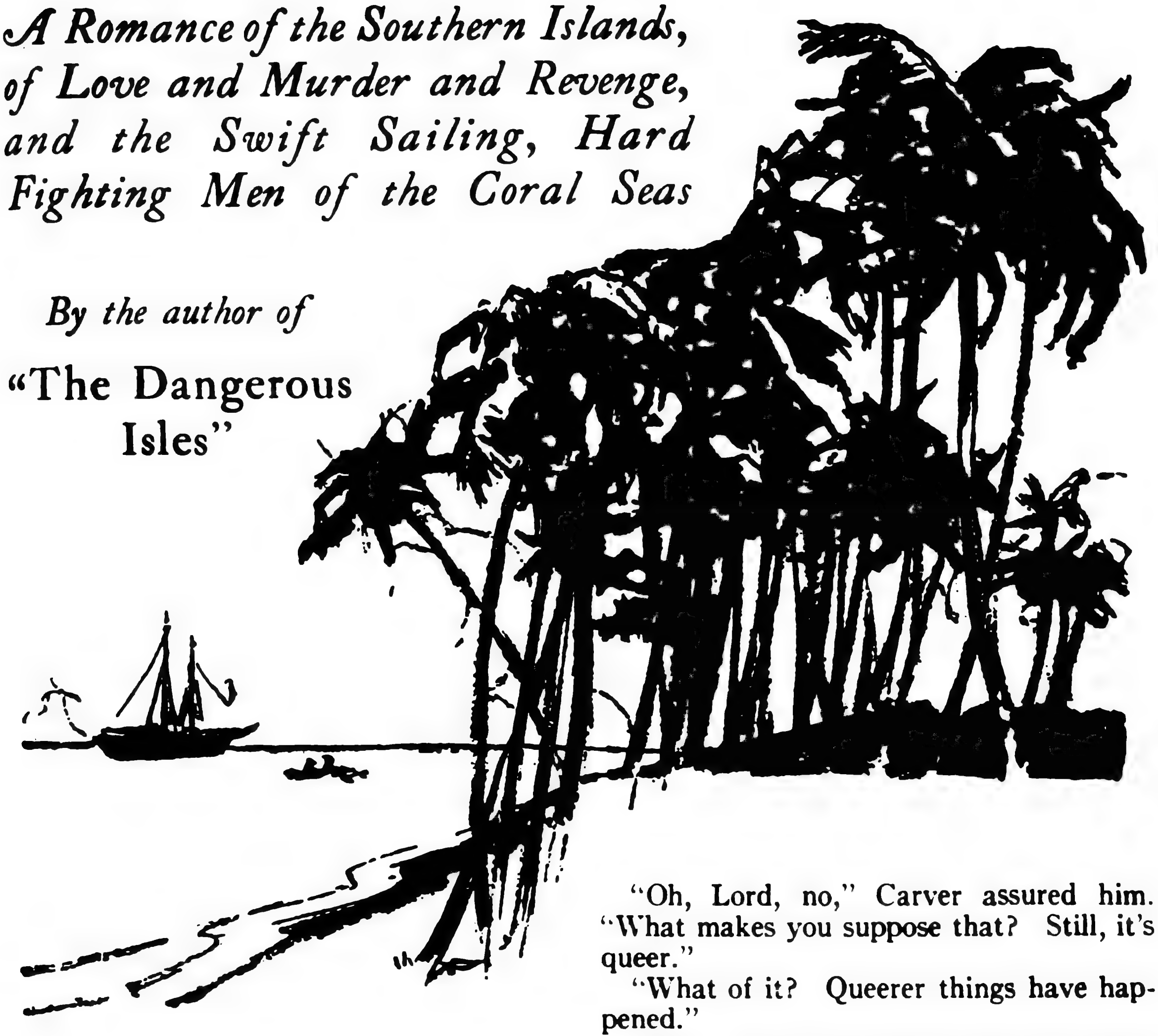
Carver turned his lazy length and grinned. He pushed his black hair out of his eyes and sat up.

The wind that blows for ever round Mowawi had bent all the palms towards the north. From far out at sea the island gave the impression of a head whose hair had been combed severely with a wet comb. A line of white houses straggled fitfully above the beach, and came to a

A Romance of the Southern Islands, of Love and Murder and Revenge, and the Swift Sailing, Hard Fighting Men of the Coral Seas

By the author of

"The Dangerous Isles"



full stop at Renny Thompson's bungalow. Most things stopped when they reached Renny Thompson. Away to the left lay a cluster of Kanaka dwellings, primitive affairs of twisted boughs, cunningly thatched with fiber. The roar of the surf on the reef came heavily across the lagoon. Somewhere a dog was barking monotonously, insistently.

McGinty yawned. "Damned hot," he said, and lay down again.

He was roused by a kick from Carver.

"What is it?" he demanded irritably.

"I've been thinking," said Carver, regardless of his partner's wrath, "and it seems queer to me about Mason. I'd always thought it was Stewart that did him in. Wonder who it was then?"

"Can't say. Pretty many people have blamed it onto Stewart. Anyway, Mason's dead. And he was nothing to us. I'm not raking it up again. Are you?"

"Oh, Lord, no," Carver assured him. "What makes you suppose that? Still, it's queer."

"What of it? Queerer things have happened."

"Sure. That boy in there, for instance," Carver jerked his head towards Thompson's bungalow. "Do you reckon we ought to go up and have a look at him?"

"Not yet. Thompson's goin' to give us a shout when he comes to."

Carver rose. "I'm going down to see what's doing. If we're to make Ritaritari by next Thursday we ought to start tomorrow morning. If Murchison's got that copra ready, the boys can start right away to load up."

"Time enough," said McGinty easily. "It's too hot yet."

"It's not too hot for them to get soaked in kava," the other reminded him. "I don't want 'em all drunk before sundown. If we don't hit Ritaritari by Thursday, we'll have to wait a week for the Honolulu boat. Remember the row we had last time the stuff was late?"

He stalked away and McGinty watched him with sleepy eyes. That was the worst of Carver. He was as restless as a tiger.

Still, it was just as well to see that the boys didn't get stewing in their beastly native liquor. Rotten stuff it was, that made them heavy and stupid like pigs, fit for nothing but sleep. Sleep. He stretched himself luxuriously, then forced his eyes open again.

If he went to sleep he would not see when Thompson came out and waved. He had offered to stop and help, but Thompson had shooed him out as if he were a hen. Well, the lad couldn't be in better hands. How far had Carver got? Ah, he was stopping to talk to Humbert of the *Marigold*. Now he was going on again to the Kanaka huts, to find the boys and kick them towards the copra that was to load the *Nancy Q*. There was a break in the reef large enough to admit fair-sized boats, and the *Nancy Q* lay quiet on the crystal green of the lagoon. It was nearly four o'clock and Mowawi was waking up after the torpor of noonday. Waking up! When would that lad wake up? McGinty turned his back on the water and stared at Thompson's bungalow. It was a rum go, he mused, a rum go.

He was still watching when Carver strode back across the beach and mounted to the shelter of the palms.

"Nothing doing?"

"Not yet. Murchison have the copra all right?"

"Yes. The boys are at it now."

McGinty wiped his lips. "I'm dry," he said. "Why don't Thompson come and give us a signal to go over? I'll bet you went into Henny's and had a drink just now."

"You bet I did," retorted Carver.

"Oh," grumbled McGinty, "you always—say, there's Thompson. Come on."

He scrambled to his feet and set off towards the bungalow. Carver overtook him as they reached the crazy building. Thompson was waiting for them. He was a small, thin man, with a very white face. The thing that struck people first was the brilliancy of his eyes. They were like two bits of blue stone. Some said he was slowly going mad. Others contended that he had never been wholly sane. His queerness was the gossip of the island. His habits were deplorable. His morals were a byword. But sometime in the dim past he had been a doctor. Fifteen years in Mowawi had left him with fragments of the skill and knowledge of which he had once been so proud.

"Has he come round?" asked McGinty.

"He's coming, I think. Better step in and look at him."

Soft-footed, they entered and made their way through the pigsty that Thompson called his living-room to a bedroom beyond. Skirting a pile of sprawling books, flanked with bottles, they came to the rickety bed.

The boy lay as still as death. He was about eighteen, as far as they could judge. His brown eyes were wide open, staring vacantly straight before him. Through swollen lips his breath came very faint and slow. There was a queer smell of disinfectant in the room. The three men surveyed the thin body silently, until McGinty said, "He's lookin' bad."

"He is bad," Thompson said grimly. "He won't live the day out."

"What is it that's wrong?"

Thompson plunged into technicalities, rolling the large words lovingly on his tongue. The other two listened helplessly until he had finished.

"Speak plain," growled McGinty, at last. "D'you reckon me and Carver can understand all those words you're spilling? Cut it out, and tell us what's up."

"His inside's smashed," Thompson translated. "Smashed so badly it can't be mended. See that blood oozing out of his mouth?"

"He bled a lot yesterday."

"That's what will finish him."

As he spoke, the boy's eyes moved. A flicker of consciousness showed in them. With enormous effort, he raised one thin hand towards them.

Thompson took it gently and sat down on the bed.

"Feeling better, sonny?"

"Ask him who he is," came McGinty's fierce whisper.

"Ssh," murmured Thompson. He bent forward towards the still figure.

"Say," he said coaxingly, "you've never told us your name. Do you think you could manage it? Take your time, now."

The lad's voice came very faintly.

"Hilton. George Hilton."

"Where from? Where had you come from when we picked you up?" said Carver softly.

"South," said the thin voice.

"Been in a fight?" McGinty asked. The boy nodded.

"Where'd you come from?" persisted McGinty. "What boat was you on?"

"*Melisande,*" said the trembling lips. "Corin's boat. Corin from Waihiti. They—rammed us. He said he'd—get Corin."

"Who? Who was it?"

"Traquair."

He raised himself on one elbow, and his voice broke into a scream of panic.

"He's coming! He's coming!"

Thompson sprang forward with a towel to check the rushing blood that choked the words. He motioned the other two to stand away. After a minute he flung the sodden towel aside and snatched up a dry one. Then he bent closer, and put it down unused.

"He's gone," he said. "Holy Michael, what a rotten end for a kid like that!" His blue eyes burned fiercely. "Someone ought to swing for this."

"Well, don't glare at me," said McGinty indignantly. "We ain't touched him. Picked him up two days ago in a dinghy, we did, and me and Carver have tended him like a couple of grandmothers."

"Get into the other room," said Thompson. "I'll fix things in here. Yes, I can manage. There's Irish in the cupboard, and Scotch under the table. If you want soda you'll find it somewhere around. God, he's young to die! His skin's like a woman's. You might find the soda in that box near the window."

The outer room had a rakish air. It might have been the disreputable offspring of a liaison between a bookshop and a wine cellar. Thompson was an omnivorous reader. The *British Medical Journal* jostled *Le Rire* for a place on the same untidy heap. Anatole France sprawled side by side with Marlowe and Herbert Spencer. When Thompson had finished a book he used to throw it down. It lay where it fell until it occurred to him to read it again, after a period of, say, eight months.

McGinty decided on the Irish. They unearthed a couple of glasses, and Carver began to fill his pipe. Neither spoke. Well acquainted with death, as men must be who live among the Islands, they were quick to feel the tragedy of a life cut short. When Thompson came in at last, he found them still silent. He looked from one to the other as he poured out a drink.

"What do you know about him?"

"About as much as you do," said McGinty. "Two days ago, just before sundown, one of the boys sighted a dinghy on the port bow. That kid was lyin' crumpled up at the bottom of it. Gawd knows where he came from, or where he was goin', or how long he'd been adrift. Hey, Carver, what's got ye?"

Carver stood up with a jerky movement that sent a pile of *La Vie Parisiennes* crashing to the floor.

"You heard," he said. "You heard what that kid said. Traquair. That's what he said. Traquair——"

"Easy now," said McGinty anxiously. "Yes, he said that and I heard him. Well, what of it? That's an old tale. You've forgotten—about that. Ain't you?"

II

TRAQUAIR . . . So a man who was looking for Traquair might find him on Waihiti, might he? Carver's hands clenched until the knuckles stood out white. Even McGinty could never gauge the depth of his hatred for Traquair. His right hand crept to his chest, and under his thin shirt his fingers found the scar that Traquair's knife had planted there, years ago. Four years. It seemed like last week. He had only tc close his eyes to live through it all again. He saw himself hurrying down a dark street that led to the sea. He felt the coldness of the iron box that he carried. He remembered the panic that seized him when Traquair leaped on him out of the night. Again he fought, savagely, madly, guarding the box with his left arm, striking out with his right, till a searing pain in his chest sent him staggering back. His head swam with pain and his knees bent under him. He made a desperate effort to stave off Traquair's clawing hands. It was the last thing he remembered till he awoke to see the sun rising over Hongkong. McKane of the *Daisy* was trying to lift him, and his shirt was stiff with clotted blood.

Four years . . .

Since then he had hunted Traquair as a man hunts a wolf. He had traced him from Hongkong, south to Saigon. He had missed him by a day in Bangkok. A month after he caught sight of the *Amaranth,* Traquair's boat, as she sped out of Port Moresby. Rumor had said Traquair intended making for the Carolines. Carver deserted from the *Jean-Marie* and stowed away on a tramp that was going to Pelaos. At the end of a journey that was the nearest he ever got to hell, they flung him out on the sand at Pelaos, more dead than alive. After days of fever he found himself stranded, penniless and sullen. No one in Pelaos had heard of Traquair. For weeks he stayed about, living as best he could, waiting for a chance word, a stray hint, that would tell him what he wanted to know. But none of the seafarers who came to Pelaos had heard of Traquair.

Then one day the *Pansy* came in from Wakatea, far to the southeast. Her cook had died in a quarrel and the skipper offered the job to Carver. Sick of himself, he took it. On the way back to Wakatea, they ran into a storm that lasted five days. He and Glynn and the others had worked like devils to save the ship. With their bare hands they wrestled with rope and wood and iron till the bruised flesh was raw. Their sweating sea-worn bodies must have failed but for the passionate desire for life that inflamed them. For an eternity they fought and struggled and sometimes prayed—queer, cursing prayers jerked out while they waited for the next wave. Death was aboard, waiting to take over the ship. And they had defied him. To Carver the triumph was the greatest he had ever known.

The *Pansy* crawled into harbor like a sick rat. Carver had a broken thumb. He was gaunt and red-eyed from sleeplessness, and his very bones felt sodden. But the rot that was killing his soul had been checked. In the fight against the sea he had found himself once more.

After that came McGinty and long months of trading in the *Nancy Q.* For two years McGinty and Carver had sailed together. But they had not seen Traquair. Now and again tales reached them of wild doings, wherein his name was bandied freely. But he was elusive. There were many men in the Islands who would have been glad enough to lay him by the heels.

"Forgotten it, ain't yer?" came McGinty's voice again.

"Yes," Carver shouted at him. "I reckon I've forgotten what I suffered because of him. I've not been looking for him for four years so's I can kill him. Oh, no! I've been looking for him to shake hands and invite him to have a couple. If it hadn't been for him——"

"All right, all right," Renny Thompson soothed him, stretching for the Irish. "Guess we know what you owe him. So he's down in Waihiti, is he?"

"Carver," said McGinty solemnly, "if you're goin' to follow this up, it's goin' to bring us bad luck. I feel it in my bones. Let it go, sonny. We're doing well with the copra-carryin'. Where's the sense of risking everything just so's you can get hanged for knifing Traquair?"

Carver made no answer. He sat down again, his hands locked, his dark eyes staring straight before him as though he could see Traquair's face looming through the smoke-filled air.

"Now you know where he is, you'll get him," said Thompson.

McGinty interrupted violently.

"Chuck it! If him and Traquair was to meet, it'd be a murder. He's as strong as a mule, Traquair is. I've seen him pick up a Kanaka and smash him on the ground times and again till he was just a lump of jelly. I saw him years ago in Maraba. Gawd, what hands he had!"

"Reckon I've got hands too," said Carver grimly. "Don't I owe him something? That night in Hongkong. I can feel the cold and the rain now, and the pain where his knife struck me. He meant to kill me. He knew what was in the box. Damn his eyes, I'll get him one day."

"Aye, you've got a score to settle," agreed Thompson. "So has that lad in there."

"If you've got any fancy notion that I'm a sort of Saint George going around avenging every young fool that gets hurt, you're dead wrong," Carver assured him. "I'll pay my own debts to Traquair when I meet him. Why don't you clear up this mess? You live like a pig."

For no reason, McGinty shivered. The sun was far down the sky and shadows crawled from the corners of the room and stole stealthily across the floor. From the beach came faint cries from the boys. "Makinitee! Come, Makinitee!" The last load of copra had gone aboard the *Nancy Q.* There was just time to get through the opening in the reef before nightfall. McGinty laid a hand on Carver's shoulder.

"Come on."

"Where are we going?"

"We're going straight to Ritaritari with the copra," said McGinty firmly. "That's where we're goin'."

"And after that?"

"After that——"

"After that we're making for Waihiti."

"No," said McGinty, "not that. Let Traquair go."

Carver rose and faced him.

"Then at Ritaritari we'll part. You can go on with the copra in the *Nancy Q*, but me—I'm for Waihiti."

He turned and strode out of the room. They heard him hurrying down the path to the beach. McGinty shrugged helplessly.

"He's as headstrong as the devil. Him and Traquair——"

"Shall you go to Waihiti, then?" asked Thompson with interest.

"Reckon so," McGinty said gloomily, and followed Carver out of the bungalow.

When they had gone, Thompson went and stared at the dead boy. Early tomorrow he would get busy with a spade. The padre from Patterson Island would be over next week. Perhaps he would say a prayer over the grave. Not that it made much difference, Thompson considered, but it was as well to be on the safe side. The dead took offence so easily.

He lit the lamp and went back to the outer room. Here he scattered three tottering stacks of books in a search for Jeremy Taylor's "Holy Dying." When the dust had subsided, he sat down and began to read. The lad's death had sobered him. He was vaguely and resentfully conscious that one day he himself would lie still like that, oblivious even of the clink of bottle upon glass. He read uneasily until he reached the end of the third page. When he tried to turn over he discovered that he was holding a glass in his hand. Gravely he shook his head at it, emptied it and set it down. At the end of the eighth page it had filled itself and crept back into his hand. With a sigh he let the book slip to the floor.

Presently he rose and went to the window. The *Nancy Q* had cleared the opening. Her lights showed her to be well out to sea. She was heading southeast for Ritaritari.

And after Ritaritari . . .

CHAPTER II

THE MANKILLER

THERE was a shark in the lagoon at Waihiti.

Hogan's boy, Kuahe, saw it first. He was not able to warn the rest of the town, because the only part of him that came ashore was a foot that the shark missed. Ten minutes later Hogan came out of his store and shouted for him. In the middle of his third bellow he stopped abruptly and the veins of his neck began to subside. He had seen the stained patch of water in the lagoon.

Within forty seconds the lagoon was swept by a hundred keen eyes. The Kanakas clustered down to the water's edge taunting the shark, vilifying it, cursing it, in loud, furious voices. But the gorged fish did not rise until they had screamed themselves hoarse. When at last they caught sight of the gray triangular fin their fury rose in a crescendo of sound. Five of them, bolder than the rest, pushed out in a crazy-looking catamaran and paddled wildly about, waiting for a chance to wound the monster with their spears. It avoided them, darting quickly under the lee of the *Amaranth's* long boat, that floated idly on the still water. Then it turned savagely and charged the catamaran. The flimsy craft shot into the air. The five Kanakas struck out wildly. One of them was near enough to the longboat to be hauled aboard. The others made for the shore. Two of them reached it.

They were dragged up the beach in an uncanny silence. Terror had overwhelmed the rage of the Kanakas. They stood in a stupor, turned into brown images by the horror of the thing they had witnessed. Presently they began to sway from side to side and a long, mournful wail rose on the air. Hogan stuffed his fingers in his ears. Again and again rose the cry, hopeless, heartrending, indescribably bitter.

Hogan shivered and went back into the store.

"Gives me the creeps," he said to Bill Parsons, who had followed him on the chance of a free drink. "If anyone's got a right to make that howlin' noise, it's me. Kuahe was one of the best boys I ever struck. Lord knows what took the fool to go swimming."

"Aye," agreed Parsons thirstily, "I shouldn't wonder if it's a tiger-shark. That kind's terrible fierce. I remember once——"

"Soon as you get a boy licked a bit into shape, the bloomin' shark must go and nab him. And them fools that went into the catamaran! I tell you, I think the natives go stark mad sometimes. Like that tribe of niggers somewhere that think they'll go to heaven if they die in battle," said Hogan. "An' let me tell you, Bill Parsons, you'll get no more drinks this day. So get out when you like."

The disconcerted Parsons moved slowly towards the door. Hogan grinned as the tattered shorts faded from view. He leaned his burly arms on the shining counter, polished by many sleeves, and gazed with somber eyes at his well-stocked shelves. Next time young Hackett came he meant to order a box of artificial flowers. The Kanakas had taken a fancy to the last lot—a lucky speculation—and they were in great demand for trading purposes, as their unfading blossoms were considered to be magic. Hogan sucked at a hollow tooth and mused upon the gullibility of human nature.

A shadow fell across the doorway. It belonged to Traquair.

"Who's dead?" he demanded. "Those Kanakas want a belting. Making that filthy row! Did the shark get somebody's boy?"

"He got mine, damn his hide," returned Hogan with wrath. "If I had Kuahe here now I'd skin him alive. I'd teach him to go riskin' his life for a swim. But that's natives all over. We haven't had a shark in since last Monday week. Reckon Kuahe thought that meant they'd all died out. And if you'll believe me," he leaned forward impressively, "five more fools have been out in a catamaran to try and get the beggar. Well, he tried to eat the catamaran. He couldn't manage it, but he chewed up two of the crew. I'm thinkin' of putting out a hook for him. I'd like to catch the old cannibal."

"What'll you bait it with?"

"Bill Parsons," said Hogan vindictively. "Do him good, it would. And any shark that had to chew him up would die right off. He's drunk so much he's like tanned leather."

Traquair grinned.

THE long-drawn-out wailing had ceased. The Kanakas were still gathered along the beach. Every time they saw the sinister fin they let out a yell of baffled rage. Traquair's gaze wandered beyond them to the reef where a thin line of white marked the breaking waves. His gray eyes were keen and piercing. The Kanakas had a name for him that meant the Master-With-Eyes-Like-Spears. His skin, naturally fair, was bronzed by years of southern suns. The strength that lay in him showed in his broad shoulders, and in the hairy arms where the veins stood out like cords. No man, who understood the savagery that lurked in Traquair's mouth and nostrils, cared to thwart him a second time.

Hogan's oily skin was damp with sweat. He wiped his forehead with the back of his plump hand.

"Don't believe I've got a hook that'll do to catch the brute," he said. "Perishin' hot today, ain't it? Looks to me like a storm coming."

He went into a back room and groped in a corner among a pile of tarred rope, fish-hooks, knives and hatchets. Presently he grunted with triumph and wrenched something from the bottom of the collection.

"This is a twelve-pound barbed hook," he said when he got back to Traquair. "It was left here eight months ago by a yacht that come in with a sporting party aboard. Five gents and a couple of skirts. They were explorin' what they called 'Nature Untouched,' which meant killin' one of everything and havin' it stuffed. They were here a week. They didn't stay longer because they said the open sea was calling them. Most likely it got 'em too, because the day after they left that big storm come on. Kuahe and the boys went aboard, of course, tradin' fruit an' such, and Kuahe pinched this hook and brought it home. He gave it me for three sticks of tobacco and a bit of pink ribbon."

Traquair took the hook in his hands and weighed it thoughtfully.

"It might do," he said. "I suppose Kuahe didn't pinch a coil of wire rope at the same time, did he? I thought not. Well, that tarred stuff's no good. Haven't you got anything stronger?"

Hogan dived into the gloom of the store and emerged at length with a coil of four-strand manila.

"Guess this rope's as good as any in the Islands," he said. "McClusky over at Patterson ordered it six months ago. He ain't been for it yet. If it gets hurt I'll order another when Hackett comes and tell old Mac they've doubled in price. Eight fathoms, ain't it? Yes, I thought so."

Traquair took the rope in his great hands.

"Think it'll hold? What about whipping some copper wire round the hook end?"

But Hogan could not produce any copper wire. He scratched the bald place on his head and stared at his shelves.

"I'm right out of it," he said. "But Nicode might have some."

Traquair coiled the rope again carefully.

"I'll drop around and see," he said with a casual air.

Hogan winked.

"Well?" said Traquair, grimly. "What's the joke?"

"Nothin'," replied Hogan, flustered. "Can't help a bit of dust in my eye with all this rope about, can I?"

But when Traquair had gone down the sandy path where the beach convolvulus twined around everything that would give it a hold, Hogan grew grave. Traquair was a bad one to joke with, he reflected. Nicode! Ah, that brute! Hogan spat with sudden feeling.

Traquair strode down the path and turned into the road that wavered along above the beach. The people still thronged the shore. He called "Tali!" and a Kanaka came running.

"You catchem shark?"

Tali shook his head.

"Tiark strong all same devil," he said. "Tiark kill Kuahe, he kill Tohani, he kill Moana. No kill any more fella Kanaka. No kill Tali. Tali keep safe. No try catchem."

"You go Hokani (Hogan) fetchem one fella rope Hokani give you," Traquair ordered. "You fetchem one fella hook Hokani give you. You carry all hook all rope, house belong Nicoti (Nicode). Me wait house belong Nicoti. You make haste all same damn quick. Savvy?"

"Savvy, Tarakawa," said Tali. He set off at a run and Traquair turned aside to the path that led to Nicode's house.

Nicode's house was a ramshackle affair. Every time a bad storm came it blew down into a confused huddle of planks, boughs, and fiber thatching. Nicode didn't mind. He said it broke the monotony of existence. Next day he and the Kanakas would set to work and build it again. Its chief feature was a sheet of corrugated iron, eleven feet by nine and a half. This was usually built into the front of the house. Occasionally it was used as roofing. Once it was banished to the back. This was after it had fallen on Nicode and nearly killed him. After the next storm and subsequent rebuilding, he relented and restored it to its place of honor by the door. The Kanakas dreaded it because it gave out weird clangs when touched.

When Traquair reached the house he found its owner contemplating the corrugated iron. In one hand was a brush. In the other was a tin marked "Sun-Up Apricots. Best Quality." It had tar in it.

"What are you going to do with that?" demanded Traquair, wiping his neck.

For answer Nicode stepped forward and began to rough out a pair of eyes on the ridged surface. Traquair sat down and watched him. Nicode was of middle height. He had been an acrobat, and enormous strength lurked in his wrists, his great chest, and his bull neck. He had little, sly eyes, set very deep.

"What's up with the natives?" he asked, drawing back to admire his draughtsmanship. "Thought I heard them screaming just now."

"Shark," Traquair told him laconically.

"Anybody hurt?"

"All he's left of a three course lunch is the foot of Hogan's boy."

Nicode set the tin of tar carefully on the ground.

"You don't mean that?"

"Yes. I'm going to catch the brute."

"You are?" said Nicode with interest. "How?"

"Hook. I want some copper wire. Hogan said you'd got some."

"You'll find it down by the jetty," returned Nicode. "Judith's there. She'll show you."

II

TRAQUAIR went down to the little jetty that Nicode had built out of odd planks and packing cases. Judith was sitting on the edge, dangling one slim foot in the water.

"Hullo," she called. "What's happening over there? A fight?"

"A shark," he explained. "I want some copper wire."

Her blue eyes gleamed.

"You're going to get him?"

"Yes."

She was on her feet with a bound. Nicode had made her as agile as himself.

"I'm coming too."

He laughed. "Trust a redhead to be in at the death," he teased her.

She sprang at him like a little wild cat, roused by the taunt. The slim, supple body against his own sent a queer thrill through him. His arms closed round her. She struck at him then, not the wasteful, arm-swinging slaps natural to women, but straight hard blows with clenched fists. Her full red lips were drawn into a thin line. A determined fist caught him on the jaw.

He set her down.

"You little spitfire!"

"You let my hair alone," she panted, running her hands through the fiery mass till it stood up all over her head in a great bush. "And if you touch me again, I'll give you hell."

"Touch you! How could I help it, when you nearly choked me?"

"You know what I mean," she told him, with narrowed eyes.

So she had felt the caress in his hands. He stared at her while she dived into a clumsily built shed and flung a coil of copper wire at him. For the hundredth time he wondered how Nicode could have got a daughter like this. He had never seen the mother whom Judith could not remember, but he judged her to be a creature very different from the heavy, taciturn Nicode.

That artist was waiting for them at the top of the slope. With him was Tali, just arrived with the hook and manila rope.

For an hour they worked, Traquair and Nicode and Tali, until they had bound the hook securely and strengthened the rope for a distance of six feet. They were taking no chances. Judith sat and watched them. Skilled in women, Traquair paid no heed. He did not even look at her. Yet he was acutely conscious of her nearness. As his skilful fingers wrenched at the rope, his mind puzzled over the sudden emotion that she had roused in him. Till that day he had looked on her as a child. But the pricking of his senses as his arms closed round her warned him of her womanhood. What age-old wisdom had taught her to recognize the subtle change in his grasp?

"Well, that's enough," Nicode grunted. "'Have we made her too heavy to throw?"

He stood up and whirled the rope tentatively.

"Are you going to wait till tomorrow? The shark's pretty well gorged. Maybe he won't rise."

"I never wait till tomorrow," said Traquair. "Tali, we gettem shark. You fetchem one fella hook 'long me."

He turned to Nicode.

"Got your gun?"

Nicode nodded. They set off through the palm grove. Tali first, bearing the rope. Judith brought up the rear. She walked with the easy swing of a graceful boy, whistling as she went. In front of her Nicode and Traquair argued as to the probability of the shark rising after such a meal as he had had. Nicode was inclined to be doubtful. The brute would be torpid, surfeited. Traquair shook his head.

"He's likely to be sluggish? Well, that's all right. He won't have so much kick. Damn his hide, do you think I'm going to wait till he's frisky again? Not on your life. He's fat now. He's bloated. But there's one thing will fetch up the laziest shark, and that's blood. I'm going to kill one of Hogan's pigs."

They swung into sight of the lagoon.

"Boat coming in," remarked Nicode. "Who is she, I wonder? Those Kanakas had better shut their mouths. They'll scare the shark off."

"Tali," said Traquair, "suppose Kanaka not quiet, shark not come. You tellem all boy go sleep not make sound. Suppose Kanaka make sound, Tarakawa beat all same dead."

Tali nodded. He laid the rope on the ground and ran towards the crowd of natives. Throwing his arms above his head, he shouted some words at them. When he had finished there was complete silence. Every Kanaka in Waihiti stood in deadly fear of Traquair. They knew by bitter experience that he would carry out any threat which he made. At the abrupt cessation of sound Hogan came out, gazing round hurriedly with apprehensive eyes.

"A pig, is it?" he said when Traquair demanded that animal. "Well, I reckon pork's too scarce just now to waste it on a bloomin' shark— Oh, all right, all right."

He spoke, and a couple of Kanakas set off in pursuit of one of the gaunt, long-legged animals that roamed the shore. It led them a squealing chase before they captured it and brought it still struggling to Traquair's feet. He despatched it, and caught some of the blood in a bucket that Hogan had brought.

"I'm going to see if he'll rise," said Traquair.

HE TOOK the bucket to the water's edge and flung the contents on to the smooth water of the lagoon. Anxiously he watched the reddened patch. Before two minutes had passed, a fin cleft the surface twenty yards from the beach. A hundred dusky hands pointed excitedly. Traquair nodded.

"Thought so. He's awake."

Skilfully he baited the barbed hook with a haunch of dead pig. When it was fixed to his satisfaction he flung the rope to Hogan.

"You and Nicode hold fast. Tali, you catch rope all same Hokani. You pull all same devil."

As he spoke he coiled the rope loosely. Then with a swift movement he whirled the hook above his head and swung it out into the lagoon. It splashed and sank. The rope sagged. There was a moment of intense anxiety. No one moved or spoke.

Hogan spat. "He's asleep," he said. "Why didn't you wait?"

Even as he spoke the rope shifted. It tautened.

"Look out!"

The rope raced through their hands like a live thing. Traquair watched it.

"Let it go, let it go," he shouted. "Hogan, you fool, let it rip!"

They could trace the passage of the shark by the furious churning of the water. Now and again a gray fin shot above the surface, and disappeared in a swirl of foam. Traquair waded out knee deep and caught at the rope. To pull it too soon meant that it might snap under the first frenzied struggles of the shark. He called to Nicode to coil the end round his body. Hogan and Tali gripped the rope more firmly. Back and forth they went at the wave of Traquair's hand, playing the great fish, giving him time to exhaust himself before the final battle began. Up and down he went, maddened by the strange cruel thing that tore at his vitals. The water was flecked with blood. Traquair, far ahead of the other three, wondered whether the rope would stand the strain. From the first he had doubted whether it was long enough. All at once it fell slack, so suddenly that the men staggered backwards. Hogan relaxed his hold to wipe the sweat out of his eyes.

The next moment they were being dragged slithering across the sand. Traquair, up to his waist in the water, shouted to the Kanakas to lay hold. But he shouted in vain. They were panic-stricken. They stood there, nerveless, helpless, foolish as terrified children. To them it seemed that the shark was defeating the white masters. They were unnerved by the sudden jerk that had dragged even Nicode down to the water's edge. Fear of their hereditary enemy triumphed over their fear of Traquair. They huddled together, their shiny, quivering bodies weak with terror.

Nicode cursed them roundly. Hogan said nothing. He was panting in the hoarse, slavering way of a dog that has run too far. Traquair shouted to them. They followed his pointing finger and saw from the disturbed water that the shark was going round in a circle. It was what they had been waiting for. It meant that the fish was getting exhausted. Under the water Traquair's hands tightened on the rope. He threw back his head.

"Heave-*ho!*"

Again and again the cry rose. Inch by inch the rope was pulled shorewards. Hogan's hands were bleeding. His eyes were half blind with the sweat that poured from his forehead. He tossed his head, unable to relinquish his hold on the rope for a second. His efforts had been so fierce that his shirt had split across the shoulders. He could feel a warm wind on his bare flesh. Presently he became aware of grains of sand that rested between his clothes and his skin, and rubbed him with maddening irritation. Damn the shark!

"Heave-*ho!*"

Their wrenching arms felt the tremendous strain as they played the shark towards the shore. Judith, watching, wondered how long they would hold without weakening. Slowly, inexorably, the brute was drawn in. Amidst the curdled foam they could see his ugly gray body now.

He was very game. This way and that he thrashed, in furious rejection of his destiny. His small, wicked eyes fastened on Traquair. What was this strange bronzed figure that tore the life out of him?

A YELL came from Tali. On the stretch of rope between himself and Traquair the strands were parting. The shark was in six feet of water, churning up the sand with his struggles.

"Him rope go out! Him rope go out!" Tali shouted excitedly. Traquair turned his head sharply. Even as he looked the rope between himself and Tali broke and Tali and the two white men toppled backwards in a heap. Like a madman Traquair hung on, the shark's nose eight feet away from him. A devil awoke in him. The veins on his arm stood out under the strain. Unconsciously he shouted curses at the shark that plunged and floundered in the shallow water. Ten seconds more and he would be conquered. Where were the others? Where the hell were the others? He was giving ground. The water was up to his thighs, to his waist. Someone was coming. Someone tore through the water behind him. It was Judith.

"Shoot," he commanded. "Shoot—quick!"

A bullet ploughed up the water.

"Climb on to me," he panted. "Make for his eyes."

She obeyed in a flash. He could feel her hands and her swift mounting feet. She gripped him to steady herself. Her right knee was on his shoulder, her left foot pressed firmly against his belt. She steadied herself and fired. The third shot blinded the shark in the right eye. Stunned with agony he lay still.

Only for a moment did that stillness last, but it was time enough for Nicode to splash into the water and grip the rope in his powerful hands. Hogan followed, and after him came a horde of Kanakas, released from their spell of panic by the sound of Judith's gun. The hot air rang with their shouts as they flung their hands on any available part of the rope. Up the beach they dragged their enemy, into the choking, burning sand and the glare of the cruel sun. He was dying. They fetched spears and knives and clubs. They wreaked on him all the hate that lurked in their hearts against this spoiler of the seas. The tortured body lurched and quivered, staining the sand. Tali took a kris and hacked at the flesh just by the heart. Presently through the spurting blood they saw something beating jerkily. A dozen spears stabbed at it. A last shuddering heave shook the agonized fish. Then he lay still.

A storm of joy broke among the Kanakas. They shouted, they sang, they leaped into the air. They danced in triumph round and round the carcass, offering it every indignity which their simple minds could conceive. Stretched exhausted on the sand, Hogan snorted.

"Anyone would think the blighters had done it themselves. Lazy swine! Hullo, there's a boat in. Someone's puttin' ashore. Now, who's that? Look, can you make out the name? N-a-n— *Nancy*—the *Nancy Q.* Whose is she, now? Traquair, do you know?"

But Traquair paid no heed. He stood looking down on the beast that he had conquered. So should all his enemies perish, maimed and broken by the strength of his hands. He glanced at them, torn and bloody as they were, and a smile played about his mouth. It had been a near thing—yes, a near thing. If it had not been for Judith, who could say what might have happened?

From the confused memories of the past hour, one thought rose above the rest—the thought of her supple, untouched body against his own.

CHAPTER III

THE LITTLE GOD OF GOLD

LOOKS like somebody's birthday," McGinty said, as the Kanakas lowered the longboat from the *Nancy Q.* "See all them bloomin' heathens dancing? What have they got there?"

"Shark," said Carver. "Wonder who it's eaten?"

"Traquair, maybe," suggested McGinty.

Carver turned on him. "I hope not," he said in a voice that checked any further pleasantries. McGinty lifted shaggy eyebrows. So it was like that, was it?

He was very quiet as they shot over the water towards the opening in the reef. The boat-steerer, standing astride, crouched in readiness for the critical moment. Skilfully he guided the longboat towards what seemed destruction. When it appeared that they must be dashed against the coral, he straightened himself, every muscle taut. He gave the warning cry for the Kanakas to unship their oars and lifted the boat safely into the lagoon. The rowers fell to again, their blades cleaving the water till the blue and scarlet hobo-fishes fled in terror to the shelter of the coral clumps. The keel grated on the sand and Carver leaped out.

"Look out, now," McGinty cautioned him. "Don't go shootin' at sight. I've left me prayer book at home and I don't know the burial service by heart. If you don't go easy, you'll have the pleasure of a free funeral from these dancin' dervishes. Husky beggar, that shark. Eighteen feet, I'll bet. Let's go up to the store and have a drink. I ain't been here this six year and more. Wonder if Hogan's still there?"

They went up the beach road towards Hogan's. The Kanakas made way for them, watching them furtively as they passed. Through the open door came the sound of glasses and hoarse voices. Hogan's aged gramophone blared forth with startling suddenness, drowning all other sounds. He possessed three records, double disc, now grown so old and tinny that they were reserved for triumphal occasions. Under cover of the noise Carver and McGinty reached the threshold unheard. Flattening himself against the wall, Carver peered into the room.

It was getting dark. Already Hogan had lit the lamp which swung from the ceiling. He had brought out a bottle of Old Highland in honor of the victory. Nicode was smoking. Through the blue-gray clouds which enveloped him, his face showed like a wrinkled orange. Beside him Bill Parsons lolled, amiable and maudlin, mouthing feeble praises. His flabby hands clutched his tumbler greedily. There was a wet ridge about his lips. Beyond, Traquair straddled a chair. He was stinging a cut on his hand with iodine. A brown smear stained the wounded flesh. As the gramophone stopped with a final squawk, Hogan threw him a piece of clean rag.

"Hogan's setting up a drug store," Nicode said from behind his smoke screen. "He's got six tins of vaseline and a bottle of iodine. And bandages."

Hogan grinned. "Know where that vaseline came from? Last year there was a flash boy come from New York for his health. Great big baby eyes he had and a little shy smile like a girl's. Stopped here for a month. Went out bug-huntin' sometimes. And at night he'd take a hand at cards with whoever came in. He was a get-rich-quick if ever I saw one. George Pratt of the *Southern Star*, he twigged him for what he was. He didn't say nothin', but he watched. All the rest was cursin' their luck and sayin' hell was in the cards, and by-an'-by Pratt says to the boy, 'Let me wipe up that drop of whisky just by your hand,' and he mopped it up. Splashed on the table, it had.

"Well, soon the boy got excited and he banged down his glass and splash went some more. Pratt waited till he'd dealt that hand and then he says to him, very quiet, 'Can I lend you a lookin' glass?' 'Course, everybody stopped. The boy pushed his chair back. 'What yer mean?' he begins to bluster. Do you know George Pratt? Like a tiger when he's roused. Kicked the table to one side and got the young cub round the neck before he could reach for his gun. 'What cards did you deal me?' says George. 'Tell me right, or by God I'll choke you.' See what had happened? The boy had been using that slop of whisky under the light like a mirror. Every blamed card he dealt went over it.

"When George had finished with him I kicked him onto the beach. He lay and moaned there all night. We had a look at the cards. They'd been marked. Marked with a pin. The tiniest little prick that you and me wouldn't notice nor feel. Ah, but he would! When we broke open his box we found a stock of vaseline. That's why the tips of his fingers were so sensitive. He mooned round the island for a week afore the schooner took him off. He didn't get a send-off neither, did he, Nicode? Oh, no!"

But Nicode did not answer. Hogan looked at him sharply. Nicode blew another cloud of smoke. He looked at Hogan and then at the door. Traquair caught his glance. A stillness fell on them. They sat with expressionless faces, immobile, impassive. Only Bill Parsons, unaware that anything was happening, continued to drink, smacking his lips voluptuously over the ultimate mouthful.

THE rapid twilight had vanished before the moonlit darkness of the tropic night. Beyond the reef, ships' riding lights twinkled. On the beach, fires shone, and whirling forms leapt and cried in the last eddies of a triumphal dance round the dead shark. Without haste, Hogan rose and stretched himself. He moved towards the door.

Carver gave McGinty a warning nudge and strode forward into the light. At sight of him Traquair's face hardened. His lids drooped over half-closed eyes. Nicode, watching, took the hint. Imperceptibly his hand worked towards his gun. Carver's breath came hard through his nostrils. His chest heaved as though he had been running. Hogan and McGinty, after one brief nod of recognition, stood back, watchers at the play, aware that Death made a seventh in the room. Whom would he touch with his cold hand?

The tense moments went by, and still there was no sign from those carven figures. Even the drink-sodden Parsons had grasped the fact that something was happening. He did not turn his head but moved uneasily in his chair, his dirty fingers clutching nervously at his glass. The roar of the waves on the reef came thrashing through the still air, as the curlers crashed and broke on the stubborn coral. Raucous sounds rose from the beach, where, poisoned now with that curious taint of evil which comes with night, the triumph-dance swelled into an orgy. High, screaming fragments of song beat on the listeners' ears, the song of revenge upon an enemy, the song of the killer. Nicode's stealthy hand reached his gun and closed on it. He caught a whisper from McGinty. "Go easy, Carver."

This was Carver, then, this lean, sinewy man with black hair and burning eyes. All muscle and guts, judged the astute Nicode. He had heard Traquair's tale, a tale told slowly, with many pauses; had guessed something of the fear that lurked in the teller's mind, the fear that Carver would return. Well, he was there and Nicode knew enough about men to realize that he had come for one deadly purpose. Traquair knew it too, as he sat there, defiant, insolent-eyed, waiting.

The strain grew intolerable. How long would those two front each other, frozen into immobility save for their watchful, calculating eyes? To the rest it seemed they had been caught into a nightmare, figures in a crazed sleeper's uneasy dream.

Carver's tongue flicked his dry lips.

"I've come to kill you."

Traquair smiled. It was tinder to Carver's flame.

"Grin, if you like, you swine," he said. "I'm having the last laugh this time. Thought you'd done me in, didn't you? Thought you'd laid me out that time in Hongkong? Well, this is where you damn well get off."

His feverish searching fingers slid for his gun. Traquair stared over Bill Parsons' head at his enemy's eyes. Hogan was breathing heavily, making queer stertorous grunts in his excitement. In the shadows by the door McGinty waited, his gun at the half-cock.

Destiny chose that moment to jerk the string that dangled Bill Parsons. He quavered to his feet, his flaccid lips mouthing the words, "Don't shoot!" His left shoulder stopped the bullet that Carver had meant for Traquair. He leapt at the pain and his aimless clutching hand wrenched the lamp from its hook. It blazed for a moment and then went out, trampled under foot. McGinty had fired instantly into the confused darkness. Bill Parsons could be heard cursing feebly as he struggled for the door. Nicode gripped Traquair's arm. They had been in straits like this before. Crouching low, with arms shielding their heads, they made a concerted rush for the open doorway. Someone's foot tripped Nicode. He sprawled on the floor. Traquair dragged him to his feet again, beating off the hands that tore at them. Carver, ignorant of the geography of the room, hit out blindly, until his hand crashed against an unexpected door that led into Hogan's bedroom. It burst open and he fell headlong. He lay there stunned, dimly conscious of a confusion of sounds in the other room. Presently he got up unsteadily. The spurt of a match lit the darkness as Hogan groped for the lamp. The wick had escaped damage. He re-lit it.

Against the inner doorway Carver leant, sullen at frustration. Beside an overturned table lay Bill Parsons, snarling at the pain in his shoulder. There was blood on the floor. McGinty was sitting in a corner, trying to disentangle himself from the folds of a bolt of red twill that had left its customary shelf during the fracas. One chair had been broken. Another had lost a leg. Hogan surveyed it all with growing wrath. His eye fell on Carver.

"Now that the whist-drive's over, maybe you'll stay and help me wash up the tea cups," he observed caustically. "What the hell do you mean by it? Stop squealin', Bill. I'll see to you in a minute. McGinty, I ain't seen you for five or six years, and I hope to Gawd I never set eyes on you again. Will you quit swearin' at that red twill? Much good it'll be after this. Roll it up, you fool, roll it up!"

"I'm dying," sobbed Bill. "Yes, I am. I'm dying an' I'll go straight into the fire. Oh, why ain't I said me prayers? 'Our Father—Our Father—' I can't remember, I can't——"

Carver stepped forward. He took Parsons by the slack of his breeches and jerked him into a chair. McGinty, having vanquished the red twill, held the lamp closer. Regardless of shouts, they probed with a knife dipped in iodine until the bullet lay exposed. Hogan fetched some rag and a pan of water. Bill shuddered and chattered. Saliva dribbled from one corner of his mouth, as the iodine bit into the wound.

"Keep still," said Carver. "I'm going to lift it."

Skilfully he lifted the bullet from the clinging flesh and rolled it in his hand. Bill burst into frenzied imprecations.

"You wait," Hogan told him. "See this needle and cotton? You got to be sewed up. Yes, you have. This is what the books call a gaping wound. Hold him, McGinty!"

The wretched Parsons was forced back into the chair and held there while Carver put in two stitches. By the time he had finished the patient was bleating like a sick sheep.

"Aw, quit it," said Hogan, disgusted at this exhibition. "Next time you stop a bullet I'll let it stay in you and mortify. Look at the mess you've made. Anyone would think there'd been a pig-killin'. There's a bit of bandage here, McGinty. Tighter. Tighter still. Now a safety-pin. Now then, Bill Parsons, you can git."

They watched the victim stumble down the moonlit path. In silence Hogan moved about, putting the room straight. When he had restored some semblance of order, he took the lamp outside, put it out, poured in more oil, and brought it back burning brightly. He hung it up. Then he turned to the other two.

"Now what was the row about?" he demanded.

II

JUDITH went home at sunset. She walked slowly, flicking at the *tuitui* plants with a piece of bamboo. On any other day she might have gone with Nicode. She was a pet of Hogan's, delighting him with her saucy wit, her careless acceptance of the homage of every man on the island. But she had shaken her her head when Nicode said, "Coming, Ju?" She wanted to be alone.

Grasshoppers were singing in the long grass. Overhead a sleepy parrot flew squawking to bed. Between the stems of the palms she could see the red sun sinking into the sea. Already the stars were showing, pale drops of milk splashed on the floor of the sky. As she followed the twisting path, the noise of the merriment on the beach died away. Soon there was no sound but the everlasting song of the reef. By the time she reached the hut it was dark.

She pushed open the door and found Koro laying supper. He looked up anxiously.

"Yudita make kai-kai quick now?" he asked. "Nicoti he come along bimeby? Suppose Yudita not eat bullamacow he get all cold no damn good."

He had made a stew of corned beef, yams, and goat's milk. Judith sniffed appreciatively. But Nicode hated eating alone.

"Make bullamacow cook all same slow," she told him. "Nicoti he come bimeby."

Restlessly she wandered to the door to watch the moon come up behind the trees. She wished she had gone up to Hogan's. It was lonely here without Nicode. Well, why hadn't she gone? She put the question from her, but it came back until she faced it. Was it because of Traquair? Was it? Was it?

Yes.

She acknowledged it defiantly, abruptly, angry with him and with herself. In the darkness her blue eyes flashed rebelliously. Why should any man alive give her that curious feeling? Besides, Traquair—

She found herself living again the moment when she fired at the shark. How Traquair's arms had strained at the brute in those endless seconds before Hogan came! Yes, he was strong, and his strength appealed to the womanhood waking in her. Among the Islands the battle is to the strong, and the race is to the swift. Men might say what they chose about him, but he was a conqueror. He was more. There were wild tales whispered behind men's hands at Hogan's. They said he had the blood lust, that tiger strain which must destroy for destruction's own sake. No man cared to become his enemy. Few cared to thwart him. What he wanted he got—always. There was a saying, "As sure as Traquair."

Judith felt the hot blood in her cheeks. She had not mistaken the way he held her that afternoon, that sudden change that came so abruptly in the midst of their half-playful sparring.

Someone was coming through the palm trees. There was a sound of voices talking rapidly. Judith got up and went towards the hut. At the door she stopped, blinking in the light. What was Traquair saying to her father?

"I'll get him," said the savage voice. "I'll get him, I tell you. It's one of us this time. He'll lie up for me until he's put a bullet in me. He'd have shot me where I sat if it hadn't been for Parsons. Damned lucky the fool was there. First time in his life he's been useful."

"What is it?" said Judith anxiously. "What's been happening?"

"Nothing that matters to you," Nicode told her roughly. "Traquair, don't you be a fool about this."

"It's four years since you—you got the thing. Get hold of it then. The time's ripe. Take it to London or New York or 'Frisco. Anyway, get shut of it. What's hindering you?"

Traquair lowered his eyes sullenly.

"What should hinder me?" he parried.

There was a pause. Judith, watching, saw a swift glance of suspicion pass between them. She swung herself onto the table beside Nicode.

"What is it?"

"Tell her," said Nicode suddenly. "She might be useful. Tell her what was in the box."

"Carver and I both wanted the same thing," he said at length. "He stepped in first. He thought he'd get away with it. Huh! There's damn few men can do that on me. He didn't get far. He stole it. The Dreaming God of Fu-Chow, the chinks called it. It's—gold. Yes, I mean it. I suppose the thing stands about two feet high. The work that's in it! It's unique. It's beyond price. And the eyes! Shut. That's how it got its name."

The jerky sentences stopped. Into Traquair's eyes came a look new to Judith. She did not understand it.

But Nicode did.

"You sell the damn thing," he burst out. "You've kept it too long. I've stood by and given you your head. And——"

"It's—gold," said Traquair. "It's a little god about the height of two feet, and it's made of pure gold. It had a temple of its own. The fools of chinks used to pray to it and bring it rice and stuff. Of course, you can bet the priests had a fat time and a lazy time."

"Why don't you sell it?" said Nicode impatiently. "What a fool you are. Do you think some chink is watching for you?"

Traquair laughed.

"You've been reading magazine stories," he retorted. "Real chinks are far too lazy to chase a man across the world."

"Well," said Nicode, "I'm tired. I say I'm tired of waiting. What about my share? Tell me that, will you?"

In his anger he came close to Traquair, his furious eyes aflame. In his neck a vein stood out thick and swollen. By that Judith knew the rage which shook him.

"We'd get our own price for it," he was shouting. "What game are you up to, Traquair? I'm in on this, and by God I'll have what's my right. It's the devil's own luck that Carver didn't get you just now. If ever I saw death's heels I saw 'em tonight. I say I won't stand for it."

"Shut up," said Traquair savagely. "I can't stay here listening to all the rot you choose to spill. You'll get your share all right. Listen. I'm off tonight."

"But Carver——"

"Carver be damned," said Traquair viciously. "The *Princess Helen* is due on the fifteenth. I'll barely get to Parawa in time as it is."

He looked at Judith.

"I shall come back when I've done my business," he said. "Nicode, are you with me this trip?"

NICODE rose heavily. His face had a sullen look. He spread a cotton handkerchief on the table and flung a few things in the middle; a hunk of tobacco, a tinder-box, a leather belt. Judith sighed as she watched these preparations. She hated these absences of her father's. It meant she must gather up her few possessions and go up to Hogan's until Nicode should choose to return.

"Let me come this trip," she begged.

Nicode turned on her roughly. "Be quiet. You are always worrying me. You're not coming. So shut up. Get your things and go over to Hogan's. Here," he pulled out a handful of dollars, "tell Hogan it'll be all right. No, I'm not coming with you across the beach. We've got to hurry."

He pulled her to him and looked into her eyes.

"If anyone—Hogan or anyone else—asks where we've gone, you don't know. Do you understand?"

She nodded. "All right. But don't stay away too long. It's as dull as hell up at Hogan's."

He stood aside and watched as she started towards Hogan's, a lantern swinging from her hand. For the first time it struck him that his daughter was almost a woman. From behind him Traquair's voice came unexpectedly.

"Judith!"

She turned at the sound.

"Goodby," said Traquair.

"Goodby," she called. Traquair stood there until the lantern became a speck dancing among the palm trees. Then he shook himself, and found Nicode watching him with a grin.

"Marry 'em young and bully 'em from the start," said Nicode. "Judith's a fine girl. But if you want her——"

He stopped and came closer. "If you want her, do what I said just now. I'm sick of waiting. Sell the Dreaming God. Give me my share."

His voice rose. "Do you hear, Traquair? For a long time you've thought yourself God Almighty. You've got too big for your boots. But you can shout yourself hoarse for Judith, and you'll never get her till I've got what's owing to me."

"How do you know that I want her?"

"I've seen you look at her tonight. You look that way when you want a woman. But mind this. No tricks. Do you hear? Whoever gets Judith reaches her through a ring. You'll not treat my girl the way you treat the rest. I'll have no by-blows sprawling under my feet every time I move. Listen. There's Tali."

A low call sounded on the night air. On the jetty a figure showed, beckoning anxiously. Nicode put out the light. They went outside and he locked the crazy door. Through the sweet-scented jasmine they made their way down to the jetty where Tali waited with the longboat belonging to the *Amaranth*. In silence they rowed across the black lagoon towards the opening in the reef. Their oars splashed away the reflected stars. Low in the sky hung the moon. By its light they shipped their oars as Tali stood swaying in the bows to lift the boat on a receding wave. A breathless rush and they were over, pulling strongly in open sea to where the *Amaranth* tugged impatiently at her anchor.

CHAPTER IV

BIRDS OF PREY

AT THE door of Hogan's Judith paused. Her quick ears caught the sound of unaccustomed voices. Peering cautiously into the room she saw Hogan pouring out a drink for a tall, dark man whose clothes were torn and spattered with blood.

"Come right in, Judith," Hogan said as he put down the whisky bottle. "Be careful where you sit."

"Looks like there's been a dog-fight," Judith said plaintively. "Really, Hogan, you do keep rotten company. Who's been bleeding over everything?"

"Bill Parsons."

Hogan rubbed over a chair.

"Sit down," he said. "These two gentlemen are from the *Nancy Q.*"

Judith held out a frank hand.

"If you've let some blood out of Bill, nobody'll bear you any grudge," she told them.

Her eyes were the bluest Carver had ever seen. Who was this slim girl with red hair that rippled and shone under the light of the hanging lamp?

A kick from McGinty brought him to himself.

"Come on, little Dolly Daydreams," said Hogan. "Ain't you never seen a young lady before? She's used to manners, too. Been to school in Auckland for three years. Nicode planned for her to stay four, but the little scut ran away. Didn't you, Judith? Didn't you walk in here one day off the Tahiti boat with nothing but what you stood up in? And didn't Nicode take the strap to you? Ah, well I remember it. Where is Nicode?" he ended abruptly.

"Gone," said Judith shortly. "I'm come to stay, please, Hogan, until he comes back. He and Traquair——"

She paused, biting her lip.

McGinty leaned forward. "Go on," he said, "him and Traquair——"

"I don't know where they've gone," said Judith. "Did you want to see them?"

Carver uttered an exclamation. He rushed outside and stared across the lagoon. Beyond the reef no lights showed but the white riding light of the *Nancy Q*. Strain his eyes as he would, he could make out no other ship in the darkness.

"We've lost him," came McGinty's voice at his side. "Lord love us, did you ever know such bad luck? Say, do you reckon he was feared of us?"

"Not he," said Carver, contemptuously. "Traquair's not afraid of anyone alive. If he's gone, it's because he's got a job on hand. And what sort of a job? Huh, I've a pretty good notion."

"What?"

"Remember what that kid told us at Renny Thompson's? Traquair rammed their ship."

"That girl knows," said McGinty suddenly. "But she won't let on. Tough, they are, them red-headed ones. Tough as hell. She won't let on."

"She damn well will," said Carver.

He strode back into the store. Hogan eyed him anxiously. Judith sat on the back of a chair, her bare feet planted firmly on the seat. Carver went up to her.

"Where's Traquair gone?"

Judith's chin went up in the air at his tone.

"Why do you want to know?"

"I want to see him."

"Why?"

"That's my business."

"Then you can find out for yourself," said Judith. "Why don't you lie up for him till he comes home? That's why you want to see him. I know. I've heard him and my father talking tonight."

"Whoever kills Traquair will earn the thanks of every decent man in the Islands," said Carver hotly. "What do you know of him? If you know anything about him, you'll know he's a swine."

He gripped her shoulders and forced her to look at him.

"Where's he gone?" he said roughly. Judith's eyes blazed. Her body stiffened under his grasp. Her clenched fist, hard and strong as a boy's, shot out and caught him under the chin. Taken by surprise, he let her go.

"Look out," chuckled Hogan. "Judith boxes as well as any lad. If you're not careful you'll be knocked flat."

McGinty laughed. "Easy now, easy," he said. "You've met your match, Carver." Carver flushed sullenly. He subsided into a chair and began to fill his pipe.

"Judith," said Hogan, "you can sleep in the room you had last time. Did Nicode give you any money? Give it to me then and I'll mind it. Come along and I'll find some bedding."

The two of them disappeared through the door against which Carver had fallen during the fight. McGinty sighed when he and Carver were left alone.

"Ain't she a peach?" he said.

RECEIVING no answer he went to the outer door and looked out into the night. It was late. Wearied out with their celebrations the Kanakas had gone to their huts. The embers of their fires still smouldered on the beach. The acrid smell of burning wood mingled with the scents of the tropic night. There was a strange, indefinable tension in the air. The moon was white with a hard, brilliant whiteness. The stars were too bright, the sky too velvet-blue. It seemed as though nature were keyed up into a hard electric intensity. It struck even McGinty queerly —McGinty who had for the Pacific night the feeling a man has for a woman he has kissed too often. What did it presage? He had the sailor's dread of absolute calm. Who knew what storm might follow?

Hogan found him with his pipe gone out, staring at the coal sack.

"McGinty, how's this goin' to end? Judith, she's a little devil. Carver's put her back up all right. Why didn't the fool make love to her if he wanted to find out where Traquair's gone?"

"He ain't like me," said McGinty, modestly. "He ain't got the power of masterin' women. He don't like 'em. No, honest, he don't. Even the Kanaka girls he won't look at. Which that is what you might say unusual. That dead shark's goin' to smell high by this time tomorrow."

"That cursed thing," said Hogan gloomily. "If Traquair hadn't stopped for that, there'd have been none of this upset. He'd have been gone by noon today and you'd most likely have missed him. They say it's a sign of bad luck when a shark comes in so close. You're not sleepin' on the *Nancy Q* tonight, are you? Better have a shake-down here."

He hesitated.

"If you want—or if Carver wants to get Traquair, you might go down to Bill Parsons in the morning. He's got a boy used to belong to Traquair. You might be able to get some idea. He's a brother to Tali, a boy Traquair's got now. Kukeke his name is."

He went into an inner room and returned, bearing a couple of blankets.

"There's two mattresses in the room," he said. "One's on a bed and one's on the floor. A party that came here—straight from Bedlam, I should say—aimin' to find the simplicity of nature, said the Spartan plainness was too beautiful for words. That was afore they'd slept on 'em. I dunno who Spartan may have been, but if he made a hobby of sleepin' on mattresses like that he must have been a damn fool."

McGinty went after Hogan to survey the amenities of the proffered mattresses. But Carver did not move. He sat on, smoking furiously, seeing in every blue-gray cloud Traquair's mocking face. Where was he now, this wolf of the Islands? But for the madness of setting out at night to seek a quarry of whose destination he knew nothing, Carver would not have waited an hour on Waihiti. At sight of Traquair the fire that burned in him had leapt into a consuming flame that would be satisfied with only one thing. The lines on his face grew deeper, and his teeth clenched on the stem of his pipe.

When Hogan called to him to put out the light he made no answer. Five great moths were circling round the lamp. He watched them, noting how they played with destruction, returning again and again to the lure of the flame. What age-old mystery was this? Was it the instinct that lies behind all the life, the longing to reach the heart's desire, no matter what the cost? The soft, gray things made him think of women, and with the thought came the image of Judith to mock him with her blue eyes and her full, red lips. It was she who stood between him and Traquair. That slip of defiant womanhood had thwarted him as no man had dared to thwart him. By God, but he would get the secret from her . . .

He became aware that he was sucking at an empty pipe. He rose, and put the light out, brushing aside the persistent, hovering moths. Groping his way he stumbled into a narrow passage. Under a door he saw the glimmer of a light. He opened it and went in, speculating as to the probability of self-denial on the part of McGinty regarding the bed.

The next moment he was outside again, swearing to himself as he closed the door. When at last he found McGinty, snoring peacefully on the bed on the next room, he sat down on the mattress and unfolded the thin blanket that Hogan had put for him. To his angry surprise he found his hands were trembling. Why? What should make his heart beat so unevenly? He told himself roughly that it could not possibly be the sight that he had seen in the room he entered by mistake. Why, he hated the girl. That little scut, as Hogan called her—was there anything in the chance sight of her to set a man's heart beating? No. There was nothing.

Yet he lay for nearly an hour, seeing her as he had seen her for a moment by the light of a candle forgotten on a chair. Even when he slept at last, he saw her again, lying asleep, one bare arm flung above her head the proud curve of her throat hidden by her gleaming hair.

"BETTER let me go," said McGinty next morning. "If this fellow Kukeke knows anything I'll make him spit it out. He's sailed with Traquair. He knows where he's likely to go. You'll only mess it up."

Carver grunted.

"Yes, let him go," advised Hogan.

"All right. Go on, McGinty. When

you come back I'll go down with a stick."

He sat down and smoked while McGinty went down the path to Bill Parsons' apology for a hut. McGinty was always so damned sure of himself, he reflected, and Hogan too. It was because they were older than he was. They couldn't understand the impatience of youth at the fumblings of middle age. He sat on his haunches against the wall of Hogan's place, and watched the *Nancy Q* tossing in a fresh breeze. The smell of tarred rope from the store reminded him that they needed some on board. He was about to shout to Hogan, when Judith came to the door. She did not look his way, but he knew she was aware of him. He wondered if Traquair were in love with her. Traquair . . . The name flicked across his brain like a whip. What was McGinty doing down in Bill Parsons' hut? Impetuously he got up and turned to go down the path.

"Here," Judith called to him, "you've left your pipe."

In her hand she held the pipe that he had laid on the ground and forgotten. Without a word he went back to take it from her. As their hands met he felt a swift wonder at the softness of her touch. He took the pipe and turned away with muttered, ungracious thanks. McGinty must be making a mess of things. Every hour lost fretted him. If only Judith had spoken they might have been away on the chase before dawn. This Kanaka boy—was it likely he'd speak the truth? Probably Traquair had got the natives so scared that they would shut up like clams at the mention of his name. As he drew near the hut he heard voices raised in altercation. The door was open and he walked in.

Bill Parsons, unshaven, red-eyed, sat on a wooden chair with a glass in his hand. The air smelt of whisky. Opposite him sat McGinty, sweating with effort. Between them stood Kukeke, swollen with pride at his sudden importance. McGinty was holding out a stick of tobacco in his left hand as Carver entered.

"You sail along Tarakawa, you know where he go. You tell me true all same mitinari-true you get this fella tobacco," he was saying. Kukeke smiled at him.

"No tell."

"Look here," said McGinty, wiping his forehead, "you know Tali, you all same brother belong Tali. Tali he say where Tarakawa go, me forget. Tali he say if me forget, Kukeke tell me."

"No tell," said Kukeke complacently.

"Carver," said Bill Parsons, "quit leaning on that door-post and heave McGinty out of here. What the hell does it matter to him where Traquair's gone? Kukeke won't tell him. He's said 'No tell' about seventy-nine times. If he says it again, I'll go mad. You won't get it out of any Kanaka, even if they know. Traquair's got 'em all good and scared."

"I've shouted at him an' I've coaxed him," said McGinty, scarlet with exertion. "I might as well have sat and played poker with myself. I wonder if that gal Judith could make him open his mouth."

"I don't want Traquair on my tracks when he comes home," Parsons complained. "Kukeke's my boy and you got no right comin' down here bullyin' him. If I was on my legs instead of bein' tied here with a wound——"

Carver left the door-post and strolled into the middle of the untidy room.

"Kukeke, you come here."

Kukeke came.

"Tarakawa he go away. You know where?"

"Not know," said Kukeke sullenly.

Carver's hands moved to his belt. Very slowly he took it off. The buckle was a curious one, with a lion's head carved on it.

"Devil in this belt," remarked Carver conversationally. "Him bite liar. Where Tarakawa?"

"Not know," repeated Kukeke.

Carver's wrist moved and the belt shot out and touched Kukeke on the bare flank. He squealed. Carver put the lion's head to his ear and nodded gravely as if listening to it.

"Devil say you all same liar. He say you know where Tarakawa go."

Kukeke shook his head. The devil bit him again severely.

"You know?" demanded Carver. Still Kukeke protested ignorance, though he was plainly terror-stricken.

"Devil say get inside your head, find out," said Carver and let him have it. He had Kukeke yelping, and then howling. When he stopped, Kukeke lay on the floor and sobbed.

"You know?" demanded the inexorable voice.

The Kanaka nodded his head slowly.

"You tell me," said Carver, standing over him.

"Me tell Kahiva's (Carver's) devil," came the wailing answer. "Devil he bite all same snake. Tarakawa he go—he go Carolinas."

But Carver knew the breed with which he was dealing.

"Liar," he said, and smote again.

"Not Carolinas," yelled Kukeke then, "Amanu! Tarakawa he go Amanu."

But Carver had seen his eyes. He lifted his arm. The belt whistled through the air. Kukeke dragged himself to Carver's feet and clasped his knees. He flung back his head.

"Parawa," he whispered. Carver made a tentative movement with his hand, but Kukeke did not move. Searching the quivering face and wide eyes, Carver knew that he had the truth at last. He put on his belt again.

"Kukeke all same good boy," he said. "Devil belong Kahiva all safe now. Not bite any more."

McGinty was watching with a fascinated stare, the tobacco still in his hand. Carver took it from him and gave it to Kukeke. At this munificence from the master of the devil who lived in the lion's head Kukeke embraced his conqueror's feet in an ecstasy. Bill Parsons leaned forward, his wound forgotten. So absorbed were the four men that not one of them heard the sound of light feet outside the door, not one of them lifted his eyes to see a slim figure hurrying up the path to Hogan's.

II

THE *Princess Helen* went down with all hands.

She was coming from Melbourne and there was bullion on board. Her skipper, Henry Jackson, knew by his reckoning that they ought to sight the Port Edward Island light between eleven and twelve that night. When, therefore, it hove into view just after eight, he was slightly surprised. But there was no mistaking it. It was a revolving light that appeared once a minute, lasted thirty seconds, and then vanished.

He gave the order to steer northwest-by-north. The ship swung into her course and went full steam ahead. The razor edges of the sunken reefs that lay in her path stabbed her to death. The men launched two boats and made for the winking light. It was the last thing seen by their dying eyes as their boats were torn to matchwood by the cruel coral. The last thought in Henry Jackson's mind was bitter regret for some unknown miscalculation on his part, that had sent a brave ship to her death. He died under the impression that he was near Port Edward Island. He was wrong. Port Edward Island was fifty miles further north. He and his ship and his crew had perished on the hidden reefs of Parawa.

Traquair was late. He came hurrying down from the north, urging the *Amaranth* forward, lashing her on through the tail of a storm, until Nicode grumbled. Unlike the other, he had little seamanship. He sat in the bows and swore every time a wave broke over him. He cursed himself heartily for venturing on this trip. But he had reasons for coming. Lately, he had felt his distrust of Traquair increasing. He knew very well the fallacy of that proverb which speaks of honor among thieves. This was the first time he had come as far as Parawa. There had been other expeditions which he insisted on accompanying, but they had been less important. But by being on the spot he had obtained his share at once. Moreover, he knew how much was due to him. For some time he had felt that those ventures on which he did not accompany Traquair had yielded results which were suspiciously poor. This time he meant to be in at the kill.

Traquair came up to him and threw him a rope end that wanted whipping. As his deft fingers worked, Nicode glanced at the other's face. It was full of anxiety.

"What's up?"

"What should be up?" retorted Traquair. "We're behind, that's all."

"What of it? It's your fault. If you hadn't wanted to show off about that shark, we shouldn't have lost the twelve hours that we did. There wasn't any need for you to do that job. I believe you thought it would impress Judith. Didn't you? Eh? Isn't that the truth?"

Traquair laughed.

"You're out there," he said. "I couldn't resist the chance of a fight. Judith never entered my mind. Do you think there's need of any showing off to win her? If you do, you're dead wrong. She's mine the minute I lift my hand."

A spate of foam thudded across the deck. Nicode wiped his face with the back of his hand.

"Don't be so sure. She's no man's as yet. You think because you're strong she's bound to fall down and worship you. Don't forget she ain't soft like most women. Since she could walk, I've taught her my trade—or what used to be my trade in the old days. Hell, I'd like to feel a trapeze again! Judith's as hard as iron. She doesn't look at strength the way women do as a rule."

"What was her mother like?" asked Traquair curiously. Nicode's face darkened.

"Like Judith is now. I loved her," he jerked out. "She died when—when the other man's child was born."

"Where is he now?"

"Where I sent him," said Nicode grimly.

So that was why Nicode would never go back to England. Traquair took the mended rope from him and went aft. He shouted down the forescuttle for Tali, who came running on deck. Traquair sent him to relieve the Kanaka who was steering. The *Amaranth* was carrying too much sail. She heeled perilously as Tali swung her a point further south. Flung off his balance by the sudden sway, Nicode sprawled on the deck. As the ship righted herself he scrambled to his feet again.

"Stop grinning, you fool," he shouted in sudden rage at Traquair. "Why the devil have you got so much canvas out? Speed—speed—it's all you care about."

"We're late."

"Well, who cares? The *Princess Helen* won't run away. You'll get there in time all right."

"But Poldhu's there now," said Traquair.

Nicode stared.

"That way, is it? Huh!"

He said no more, nor did he make any comment when the wind increased and Traquair gave no order to take in sail. Poldhu . . . So there was need to keep an eye on Poldhu, then. Had something happened between him and Traquair that Nicode had not been told? As the *Amaranth* cut her way through the clinging waves, he stretched himself at full length, his hands behind his head. Lazily his eye dwelt on the look-out, swaying perilously far above him. He was conscious that this trip was going to be different from the rest. In some queer way he knew that it would bring certain things to a definite conclusion. The way Traquair spoke of Poldhu, now—what did it mean? To Nicode it presaged trouble. Who could tell what would happen when these wolves of the sea snarled at each other over the carcass of a dead ship? His eyes grew deep and thoughtful. After this affair of the *Princess Helen* was over, there would remain the matter of the Dreaming God of Fu-Chow. He would insist that Traquair sell it and divide the price with him. That was their agreement. It was what Traquair had promised him more than a year ago if he would help in a certain affair off Amanu. He had helped. Certainly Traquair would never have pulled it off alone. And still he waited for his reward . . .

A sound near by made him sit up. Traquair was seated on a coil of rope cleaning his gun. Nicode shifted uneasily.

"How much longer before we sight Parawa?"

"Midday, I should say."

"Whose idea was it? About the *Princess Helen*, I mean," asked Nicode.

"Poldhu's. It's the old blood in him coming out. He's a Cornishman. His great-grandfather was hanged."

"What for?"

"Wrecking."

The Kanaka aloft waved his hand. He leant forward, his dark face shining with excitement.

"Parawa!"

Traquair sprang to his feet. Into his eyes there crept a look that reminded Nicode of a beast before it springs. He rose and stood beside the other. What menace lay ahead of them? What awaited them in this hidden island of Parawa?

Traquair was muttering to himself. Nicode strained his ears. But all he caught was a man's name.

"Poldhu . . . Poldhu . . ."

CHAPTER V

STOWAWAY

JUDITH ran up the path to Hogan's like a wild thing. She went into the disordered room in which she had slept. Here she rummaged until she found the thing she sought. It was a clasp-knife.

She opened it and tried the blade on her thumb. Then she snapped it shut again. For a moment she stood still, considering herself in the cracked mirror perched in crazy fashion on top of a soap box. She saw there a boyish figure, clad in a man-o'-war jumper and a skirt that touched her knees. Her attire had once been white. Now, owing to infrequent and spasmodic washing, it had become grayish. There was a rent in the skirt. She had cut off the sleeves at the elbow for coolness.

How tiresome that Nicode had taken both guns. Beneath her dress her hands sought and found a slender chain that girdled her hips. She took the clasp-knife and attached it by means of the swivel. Then she patted her frock into position and turned this way and that before the glass. No, that faint bulge would not betray its secret. Satisfied, she went to the window. Carver and McGinty were coming back. There was no time to lose.

She ran into the store on tiptoe. Hogan was not there. She snatched up two gaudy trade handkerchiefs and deluged them with cheap scent out of a bottle marked "Best Triple Extract of Heliotrope." Stealthily she slipped out of the door and into the bushes of fragrant *toipi* plant that clustered near the house. Down towards the shore she sped, past a group of Kanakas quarreling by the remains of the shark, until she reached a hut almost hidden among the palms.

"Huahe," she called.

A tall Kanaka lounged to the door and stood there awaiting her pleasure.

"Huahe," said Judith, "suppose you take me in catamaran go fish, you get one fella trade."

She held up one handkerchief and shook out its cotton folds. Huahe's eyes glistened.

"We go outside lagoon get fish all same deep sea," she told him. He nodded and led the way down to the beach. Judith followed, her heart beating high. How soon would McGinty and Carver come away from Hogan's? She had seen the *Nancy Q's* longboat dragged ashore and she knew that the Kanakas would most probably return to the ship twice—once with stores and the second time with the two men. But of her plan she said nothing to Huahe, straining at the crazy catamaran that lay high on the beach. He pulled it down to the water's edge, launched it, and helped Judith to a fairly safe position in the middle. Not until they were outside the reef did Judith hint at her reason for coming. Very casually she glanced at the *Nancy Q.*

"Him boat belong Kahiva," said Huahe, following her look. "Him *Nanitee Kiau.*"

"Kahiva great friend belong me," said Judith. "Suppose we go on boat, suppose Kahiva come, he all same glad."

Huahe looked doubtful.

"Like see *Nanitee Kiau,*" persisted Judith. "Maybe we go close, maybe we find Kanaka belong Kahiva."

They paddled towards the *Nancy Q,* and Huahe hailed her. Judith held her breath, but no answering call came across the water. They drew near, until Huahe put out his hand and steadied the catamaran against the ship's side. No one was on board. The bulk of the *Nancy Q* hid the catamaran from sight of the shore. Judith stood up and began to talk . . .

It took ten minutes and both the trade handkerchiefs before Huahe would do as she asked. In his own mind he was terrified that Nicode might return suddenly and discover that Judith was not there. In which case, if Nicode learnt the truth, Huahe would be beaten to death. Of that he entertained no doubts whatever. But her imperious personality cowed him. Her demands were simple. He was to leave her aboard the *Nancy Q.* He was to work round to the other side of the island. He was not to return to Waihiti lagoon until the *Nancy Q* had gone. Secretly Judith was afraid that his courage would fail him and that he would go blundering back to Hogan before McGinty and Carver were on board.

Finally threats and coaxing so worked on Huahe that he promised reluctantly to do what she asked him.

A rope hung from the bowsprit and he watched anxiously as she swung herself aboard.

Crouching low, in case of far-seeing eyes from the island, Judith crept aft. She watched until she made quite sure that Huahe and his catamaran were well away. Satisfied that he would keep his word, she lay still for a moment, considering where this adventure would land her. In her mind was one single thought. Carver meant mischief to her father and to Traquair. Then she must warn them. She must be near them. Her hand slipped to the knife beneath her frock. There might even be a chance, just the ghost of a chance, that she could stop Carver.

A memory of his dark, determined face came into her mind, and with it there grew up a stubborn promise to herself that she would defeat his plans whatever they were. He had found out where Nicode and Traquair had gone. He was going after them. What had he said about Traquair? "Whoever kills him will earn the thanks of every decent man in the Islands." She had a sudden vision of Traquair lying dead with Carver standing over him, savage, triumphant. She shivered. He must be warned. Carver was going to Parawa. (Why else had he bullied Kukeke in the hut?) Well, she was going too!

Her quick brain cast about for a hiding place. Still keeping well out of sight, she found her way down into the hold. It was dark, and the smell of copra greeted her with pungent force. Stumbling over a half-opened box of corned beef cans, she entrenched herself behind a case that stood in one corner of the hold. As her eyes became accustomed to the darkness she made out various shapes and mounds humped near her. It seemed that the *Nancy Q* was well stocked. Perhaps they would not wait to take in any stores.

It could not have been more than an hour, yet it seemed like a week before she heard the sound of footsteps overhead. Voices came faintly to her as she crouched in the darkness. By and by came the grating of the anchor chain and then a steady swaying motion that told her the *Nancy Q* was already loping through the blue water in pursuit of her prey. Judith set her teeth. She drew her knees up to her chin and clasped her arms round them. What did discomfort matter if she could thwart Carver's plans against Traquair? Already Nicode mattered very little. Their relationship had been that of acquaintances, rather than that of parent and child. Judith's likeness to her mother had been a reminder too bitter, too constant. Always the dead woman had stood between them. Fundamentally honest, Judith admitted that Nicode mattered not at all. She was not going south to save him. He could save himself. Besides, Carver did not want him. It was Traquair—always Traquair.

If she could warn him—if she could get ashore unnoticed at Parawa—and tell him that Carver was there, with death in his hand, surely he would—he would—well, what would he do? He would turn to her with the look in his eyes which she longed to see. He would catch her to him and hold her, the way he had held her in Waihiti the day before. A sudden lurch of the ship flung her flat. She lay prone, her arms stretched, her eyes staring into the gloom. He wanted her, of that she was certain. Closing her eyes, she saw him, as she had seen him wrestling with the shark, at the moment when he called to her to shoot. Almost she could feel his body, taut as steel against hers, as she climbed to his shoulders and fired into the eye of the shark.

The hatch opened and her dreams fled. Hardly daring to breathe, she lay petrified while a Kanaka boy swung himself into the hold, seized a couple of fresh pineapples and slammed the hatch down again. She found herself trembling from head to foot. Had he seen her? Would he go running to Carver with his tale? Breathlessly she listened for the sound of hasty footsteps. But none came. Presently her limbs relaxed again. She felt faint for the first time in her life.

By the motion of the ship she judged that the wind was getting up. The *Nancy Q* began to roll. The half-opened case of corned beef slid across the floor and upset like a box of bricks. The case behind which she lay began to rock dangerously. She stood up and clung to it, steadying it as best she could. A sack of taro roots skidded across the floor and came to rest against her legs. The sudden impact threw her off her balance, and she coasted helplessly till she landed with a shock against the sharp edge of a wooden case. A swift pain stabbed her arm and she felt the blood trickle stickily over her wrist. How long was this dark misery to last?

Thirst took possession of her. Philosophically she squeezed a bit of rag into a hard pellet and chewed it to draw the saliva. The endless hours went on, merging into an eternity in which there was neither day nor night. Try as she would, she could not avoid the shifting stores. They pursued her, as the *Nancy Q* rolled under bellying canvas, careening before the wind till McGinty swore at Carver and shouted for the Kanakas to help shorten sail. The sound of their voices came faintly to Judith as she crouched among the shifting stores. Almost she repented the adventure. The hold was intolerably hot and airless. The varied smells made her feel sick. But thirst and the swaying of the ship and the faintness that recurred again and again, were as nothing to her fear of discovery. She found herself wondering exactly what Carver would do if he found out. The night before she had flouted him, even struck him. Thinking of that blow, she flushed. He couldn't hit back. Couldn't he? Perhaps not, with Hogan and McGinty there. But alone, unrestrained by their presence, what might he not do?

"You know," McGinty was saying on deck, "you're in a devil of a hurry to hit Parawa. This bloomin' boat ain't built for speed. Cargo is what she was made for. An' I wish to Gawd you and me was carryin' copra peaceful-like to Ritaritari instead of goin' on this wild-goose chase. Say," he came a step nearer, "is there somethin' you're holdin' back?"

Carver stared at him.

"There ain't—there ain't a woman in it, is there?" persisted McGinty.

"Bah!" said Carver.

"Oh, well, that's all right." McGinty was relieved. "I know you're not one for the skirts, but Traquair—well, he's different. Not that there's many white women in the Islands worth quarreling about. And certainly you got more sense than to meddle with any native truck. Them writin' chaps," said McGinty meditatively, "they'd have you think traders ain't got nothin' under the sun to do but walk around tanglin' theirselves up with Kanaka girls. I read a yarn once about a fool that loved —huh, loved—an island girl and behaved real noble about it. Went home to England and spent five years tryin' to forget her. Then he went back, and believe me, he married her. Yes, he did. Well, I ask you: What does any Kanaka woman look like after five years? By the time they're twenty-six they're so fat you could show 'em at a dollar a time. Why, they——"

McGinty became exceedingly descriptive.

He was interrupted at length by a yell. It came from Kukeke, who had followed Carver aboard with the meekness that becomes a chastened spirit.

"What's up with Kukeke?" said McGinty. "I'm sorry you brought him if he's goin' round like a screech owl all the time."

"I made him come because he's going to be useful," retorted Carver. "Kukeke, why you make one fella big damn row? You sick?"

"Oh, Kahiva," Kukeke whimpered, "me go fetch bullamacow (corned beef) down hole, see one fella ghost—aie!" He shuddered at the recollection.

"You all same liar," said Carver irately. "You fetch up bullamacow?"

"No, Kahiva."

"You go get now."

"No, Kahiva!"

Carver took him by the arm and led him resisting to the open hatch.

"You go find one fella ghost."

Kukeke pointed with a trembling finger to the dim recesses of the hold. Peering in, Carver could make out something white among the huddle boxes.

"Who's there?"

No answer.

He caught the swinging rope and let himself down into the darkness. Stumbling, he groped his way to the distant corner. Some rapscallion of Waihiti, he supposed, trying to get a free passage. He'd give the scug a belting and then let him work for his food. It was no joke having the Kanakas terrified for nothing. He knew from experience their fear of the supernatural. Once let his ship get the reputation of a ghost ship, and he'd find it hard enough to get boys on his next trip. Why, Hardy's ship had lain a month outside Mowawi one year because the natives started a yarn that she was haunted.

The ship gave a lurch. He laid hold of a wooden case and the sudden jerk threw it forward. As he sprawled beside it, his hand shot out and touched something soft. A momentary fear crept over his skin. What was it? He pushed the case aside and bent forward. His exploring hands found Judith's arm. His eyes, accustomed now to the dusk, made out the dim mass of her hair.

"What are you doing here?"

There was no reply. He judged she had fainted in the stifling air of the hold. He shouted to Kukeke, standing anxiously by the hatch.

"You go fetch Maginitee—quick."

Kukeke vanished. Very carefully Carver

lifted Judith in his arms and made his way to the hatch. McGinty's red face appeared.

"What the hell!"

"Shut up," said Carver sharply. "Take her, while I get up."

With steady hands he raised her shoulder high into McGinty's outstretched arms. He caught the rope and swung himself up beside them. Without a word he took her from McGinty and carried her on deck. McGinty followed him up the companion, panting. When they reached the deck, he wiped his neck, and stood staring at Judith with admiring eyes.

"Well, I'll say she's clipper built," he said at last. "As pretty a bit of goods as I've seen this long time. An' this is the gal that wanted to put a spoke in our wheel, eh? What's her little game, I wonder? Sweet on Traquair, I reckon, and wants to tip him the wink to look out for you."

He put out a cautious hand and stroked one limp arm gently. Rage surged up in Carver at the sight.

"Keep off," he said in a voice that startled the helpless McGinty. "If you touch her again—" He left the sentence unfinished, angry with himself at the inexplicable feeling that swept over him when he saw another man touch Judith.

"What's stung you?" demanded McGinty aggrievedly.

Carver did not answer. The sea wind set Judith's dress a-fluttering. The endless blue of the sky, the broken blue of the sea, set him thinking of her eyes. Her body lay against his, warm, helpless. His life had been too full, too bitter, for him to know very much about women. There had been sordid quayside acquaintanceships, begun and ended between days. Meaningless, bought as a man buys a drink after long days at sea . . .

"If it hadn't been for her," McGinty was saying, "we'd have nabbed Traquair by now."

"Shut your ugly mouth," said Carver.

"You're in love," McGinty jeered at him. "In love with a red-haired baggage like that! Huh! Well, I'm not stoppin' you."

He turned away and left Carver staring down at the girl in his arms. In love? With this slip of a girl who had defied, and flouted them, a girl he had only met the day before? McGinty must be cracked. Carver laughed angrily. He had good cause to hate her. She had prevented him from pursuing Traquair till it was too late; she would defy and resist him with all her might; if she could, she would stand by Traquair's side and fight against him with her strong boy's hands.

Last night he had seen her asleep. Today he held her in his arms. Tomorrow—his mind sheered away from his thoughts.

In love . . .

II

THE *Amaranth* skirted the treacherous reefs of Parawa and sighted what was left of the *Princess Helen*. There was not very much to be seen. The most conspicuous object was the body of the mate which slid by on a wave under the bows of the *Amaranth*. He had been killed by a rock, which had pierced his skull in two places. He was not a pleasant sight, and Nicode turned white about the gills.

"Thought they never rose till the ninth day," he muttered.

"He's not been drowned," said Traquair, carelessly. "Bashed his head on the reefs most likely."

He was steering, guiding the *Amaranth* along the intricate passage with a skill that told of intimate knowledge. He knew the dangers that lay in wait for the ship at every turn. A false move, and the devil would have them all by the heels. A sudden squall would mean certain annihilation among the coral razors. Yet the imminence of destruction left him undaunted. In his gray eyes there burned a fire that was never lit except in the presence of danger. Every nerve was strained to the highest point, every sense was alert. The Parawa reefs were old enemies of his, enemies in whose conquest he rejoiced, as he rejoiced in all conquest, whether of a man, or a ship, or the restless, terrible sea.

The *Amaranth* was under light canvas. To try speed in circumstances such as these was merely suicidal. Yard by yard, she crept nearer the island, edging her way among the sunken rocks, as a man walks delicately among naked swords. Nicode, only half aware of possible dangers, was nevertheless sufficiently nervous to draw forth Traquair's scorn.

"You're looking pale," he said. "Why don't you go and lie down and have a cup of tea? Perhaps you'd like an aspirin?

Maybe Tali can find the smelling salts somewhere."

Nicode flushed.

"I tell you," pursued Traquair, "your Judith would be a damn sight better man than you if she'd been born a boy. Go below, if you're afraid."

"Who's afraid?"

"You are. You'd better not have come this trip. Scared to die, eh? Well, I don't blame you for putting it off. They tell me hell's not what it was."

Nicode turned on his heel and walked away. Traquair chuckled to himself as he watched the retreating figure. Nicode was getting too high-handed. Well, he must be shown who was master. He must be shown that he was only a tool in those hands that coaxed the *Amaranth* towards the shore. And if he turned restive, he must be—put aside.

Bit by bit the rocks of Parawa showed larger. The island itself was bare and windswept, a gaunt rocky mass rising out of the sea. Vegetation was sparse. The palms grew ragged and spindly. High cliffs rose sheer from the churning waves. From the deck of the *Amaranth* no houses were visible, nor any sign of a harbor. Screaming sea birds wheeled and fought among the crags. Traquair maneuvered until a certain rock with a white scar on it was in a dead line with a palm tree that stood almost at the edge of the cliff, apart and solitary from the nearest clump. Then he steered straight for the island.

As they drew closer a narrow opening appeared in the wall of rock that confronted them. It led by a channel of deep water into the secret lagoon of Parawa. Almost it seemed that the *Amaranth* must scrape her sides on the sheer rocks that towered above her. But so sure was Traquair that he gave no orders for the fenders to be brought. Unscathed, the *Amaranth* slid through the passage into the harbor. The color came seeping back into Nicode's face.

"You've got a nerve," he said with grudging admiration. "Blow me if I don't think you like taking such chances."

He leaned against the deckhouse and looked round. Parawa was cup-shaped. Probably there had once been a huge marine volcano in that place. The sunken crater remained. The land sloped down towards the stretch of blue water in the center. Protected from the ceaseless Pacific wind, vegetation on this inner slope was luxuriant. Breadfruit and cabbage palm grew exuberantly, and about them clustered masses of the scented crinum lilies and frangipani. Convolvulus straggled along the ground, its white and yellow blossoms contrasting vividly with the scarlet of the hibiscus. Here and there grew great masses of tree ferns, whose long graceful fronds stood higher than a man. Over the side of the ship the water showed clear and deep. Bright-colored fishes with odd, puffed fins chased each other madly in the shadow of the rocks. Long slender fish with golden backs and wicked mouths shot among them, creating confusion and dismay. Secure in their beds, giant clams opened their shells wide to catch whatever floated past. From the trees came the shrill scream of parakeets mingling oddly with the crying of the sea birds on the outer side of the island. A white beach shelved down to the water's edge. At one end was a collection of Kanaka huts. There was a landing stage, built out of the timber of some dead ship. A boat was at anchor, a cutter whose slender lines showed her built for speed.

"Who does she belong to?" enquired Nicode with a jerk of his thumb.

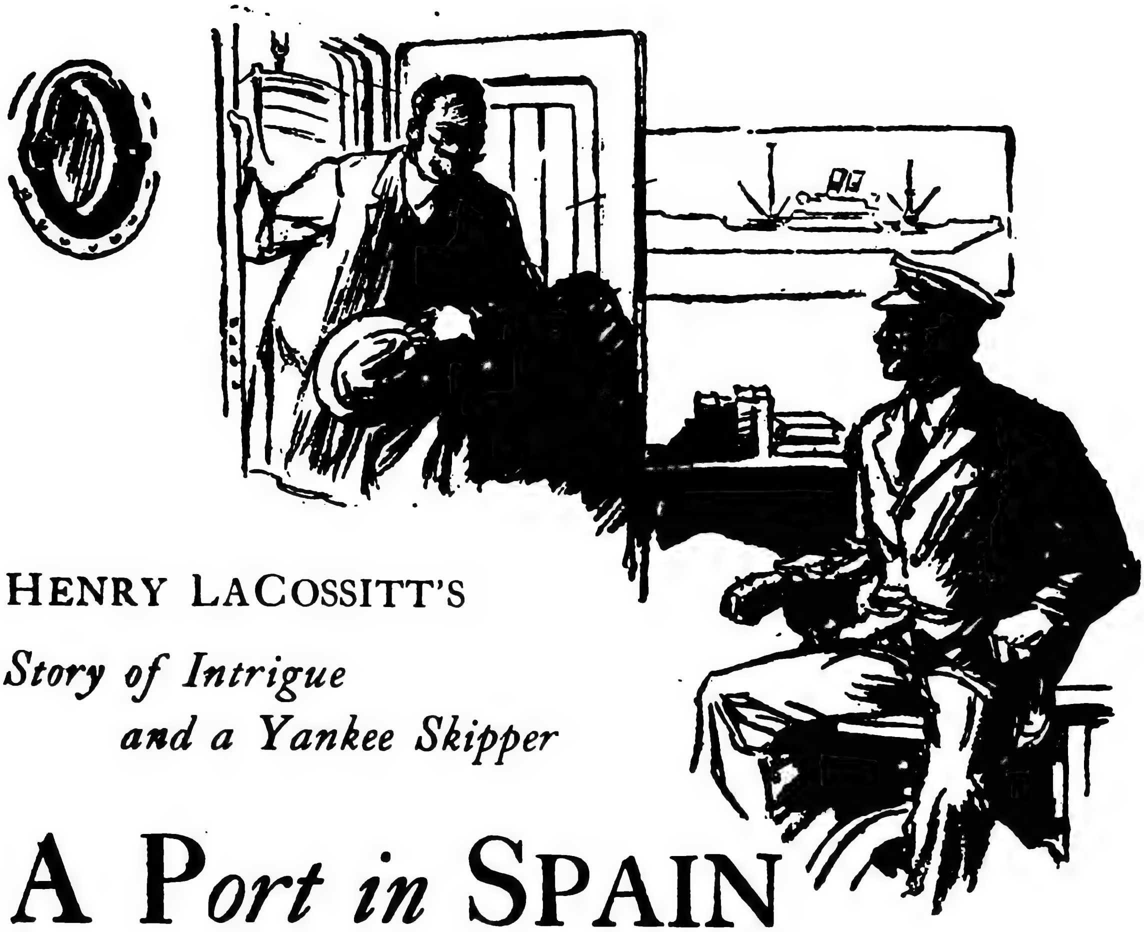
"Poldhu. She's a jewel. Goes like the wind. She's the *Wolf*. And a damned good name, too."

The *Amaranth* moved lazily towards the landing stage. At her approach a crowd of natives ran down to the beach and stood there, waving their hands in welcome. They knew Traquair's ship, and the air resounded with shrill cries of "Tarakawa!" and "*Amaranitee!*" A dozen eager hands dragged the longboat ashore.

The natives crowded round the newcomers, chattering noisily, but Traquair pushed them aside. They fell back before him as he hurried forward, Nicode following close behind. Straight on he went, along a pathway made of flat stones that led among the palms to a low white house, with barred windows. Without hesitation he flung open the door and strode in.

Poldhu was waiting for him.

In the chapters to come, Traquair and Poldhu match wits in the reckless, deadly fashion of their breed; while the Nancy Q *courses ever nearer to the Secret Lagoon.*



HENRY LACOSSITT'S

Story of Intrigue
and a Yankee Skipper

A Port in SPAIN

STORM broke over the sky line. Lightning flitted among the spires of lower New York. Low-hanging clouds assumed fantastic shapes for an instant, vanished the next, and appeared again in different guises. Thunder sounded low on the bay. The lights of the Woolworth and Metropolitan towers defiantly pierced the wet gloom. Liberty held her torch against the elements. Coney's garlands of lights festooned the black void with gaudy gaiety. The *S. S. Storm King*, of the U. S.-Arabian Line let go the tugs at Staten Island and proceeded down the channel. She was bound for Gibraltar, there to discharge coal, and then to cruise the North African coast to unload further cargo. Orders would await her at Alexandria.

"Port a bit," sang the voice of the pilot.

"Port a bit," echoed the voice of the helmsman.

Silence then, with the fine rain pecking the windows of the wheel-house. The monotonous whine of the ship's engines sounded from below. The swishing surge of the dirty water, resembling, from the flying bridge, the soft rustling of women's skirts, reached Captain John Masterson as he stood watching the storm over the city.

"Hard a'starb'rd," droned the pilot.

"Hard a'starb'rd," intoned the helmsman.

New York's lights faded; Staten Island vanished; the procession of lights, stretching seaward on Long Island, were faint now, like fireflies afar off. Soon they too were gone. The *Storm King* reached Ambrose.

"Good night, Captain. Pleasant voyage," called the pilot as he went over the side.

"Good night, sir," answered Captain Masterson. "See you in December."

"Righto."

The ship's clock tolled eight bells. Midnight and the Atlantic. The whistle moaned through the mist, warning other ships. Sea and sky merged into one vast vault of thick and impenetrable blackness. Only near the ship was this broken, where whitecaps, gray in the murk, broke against the bow.

The ship pitched a little against a head sea. Captain Masterson went to his cabin on the bridge deck.

He tried to read, but soon became sleepy. He undressed and crawled into his bunk. The *Storm King* plodded southeastward resolutely in the dark silence. Captain Masterson fell into a sleep akin to and deep as the void outside.

For ten years John Masterson had been sailing to the Mediterranean. He knew its nooks and crannies; its moods and eccentricities. He could navigate any harbor it possessed, as well as those of its sisters, the Ægean, the Adriatic, the Black, and what the ancients called the Tyrrhenian. Whether he was negotiating the treacherous lanes that wriggle in and out among the myriad Greek Islands, or maneuvering the perilous passage between Scylla and Charybdis, or sailing into an obscure port in Cyprus, he was at home and calm.

The choked harbor of Piræus held no terrors for him. Laughingly he would suggest to the fussily important Greek pilot that it would be better to do thus and so, and invariably he was right. It was the same in the Bosphorus where the fierce currents of the Black Sea sweep into the straits to form one of the most dangerous sea rapids in existence. Ships have been known to be caught in the toils of one of those serpent currents and deposited high and dry in some wealthy Turk's front yard. But never John Masterson's ship.

In his ten years of service in the Mediterranean he had not a black mark against him. Engaged in a profession whose followers are held rigidly responsible by their employers, whose best excuse is regarded as useless, and confronted with all the difficulties and trials that beset the captain of a freight ship plying in the stiff competition of Mediterranean trade, he still had a clean slate. He was the admiral of his line's skippers and his judgment was respected. Be it a matter of loading cargo, a question of disciplining men, or a choice of courses across the Atlantic in midwinter, seamen took Captain Masterson's word for it. That was final.

His men loved him; that is, as much as it is possible for seamen to love their skippers. He was firm and hard, but he was fair. Their money was theirs immediately they anchored. Or, in case the agent had been unable to procure money for the crew, John Masterson took it upon himself to do so. Likewise if there was a chance for a day off, his crew got it. But he demanded that his ship always be clean, spick, and well painted and that the cargo be immaculate. Consequently they were.

His own accounts were straight and his papers usually correct to a nicety. He bucked the cunning of agents and competition alike and most of the time won out. Nobody could put anything over on him. Unscrupulous agents had tried, but they had failed.

He was a tremendous man. Well over six feet, he carried a great weight of massive muscles on his huge frame. His hands were large and strong. His head was big and his face tanned and ruddy. His eyes were blue—laughing boyish eyes—and they glittered with wrath once he was crossed. A thatch of sandy hair, now graying at the temples, covered his big head. One lock always fell a little over his forehead, and the thatch was never adequately combed, heightening the boyish impression left by the laughing blue eyes. He was slightly over forty.

His company held him indispensable, and, just before he had sailed with the *Storm King* on the current voyage, the president had informed him that he would be made manager of operations upon his return. That was at once a joy and a sorrow to John Masterson.

For, although it meant increased salary and a position of responsibility, it also meant a sedentary life ashore and a departure from the sea he loved so well. The Viking in him protested; the adventurer in his nature demurred; the roving strain in his blood cried out, but he could not but accept it. For he did, after all, accept the conventional civilized view, and it meant much to his family. His two boys would soon be out of high school and ready for the college education he hoped to give them. The new job made this possible, so he accepted. John Masterson was not selfish. He sacrificed his natural inclinations for his family.

But this, his last trip, he would enjoy to the utmost. He would exert himself. He would make it a success, an even more shining one than his previous voyages. This would be the apogee of his career as a sea captain. Then he would settle down ashore.

THIRTEEN days out of New York the *Storm King* reached Gibraltar and lay there five days discharging coal to be used on British lines suffering from the strike in England. From Gibraltar to Algiers to unload a little and take on a little more for intermediate ports. Next Alexandria, to lie at anchor a week and discharge flour. Orders here from the European office sent him to Jaffa and Beirut, discharging automobiles and oil and picking up general Oriental goods to be used in the States over the Christmas holidays. From Beirut to Alexandretta to take on Syrian wool; from there to Smyrna to load valonea nuts, and then came orders for the tobacco run.

This was the best cargo, other than Egyptian cotton, in the Mediterranean. It was the most valuable and paid excellent freight money. Captain Masterson was elated. To the Greek Islands he took the *Storm King*, and then to the Macedonian ports, where he received a wireless to proceed to Valencia for Spanish onions. This also was valuable cargo and assured a full ship on the return voyage. Likewise it would be a chance to show his skill at handling perishable cargo. Moreover, another opportunity—a last one, he thought sorrowfully—to display his mastery, was the command of the tobacco importers to have their cargo in New York by a certain time. It might be close, he thought, but he would make it.

Reserving space for forty thousand crates of onions, Masterson sailed from Dedeagatch, bound west for Valencia. He pressed the *Storm King*, steaming twelve nozzles, taking advantage of the Dardanelles current, adroitly dodging the adverse Sicilian Straits current, and slipped into the harbor at Valencia five days later, a distance of over 1500 miles, a record run for ships of his type, late Hog Island ones, built after the armistice.

He reached Valencia on a Thursday late in November, some two months after departing from New York. Three days at the most here, he thought, and then homeward bound, to reach New York two weeks later, using full steam; or at the outside, within fifteen days. If good weather aided him, he might possibly make it in thirteen, but there was no need of it. Also to do this, he must have a favorable current past Gibraltar, which was conjecture. He planned to cross the Atlantic by the southern route, descending to a latitude even with Bermuda, crossing the Gulf Stream as it swerved from the American coast, and then veering northwest to New York. He had plenty of time. His orders were to be in New York by December 15th.

He cast anchor early in the morning and loading began. Spanish stevedores swarmed aboard and began opening the hatches. Lighters, towed by launches, came alongside, loaded with crates of onions, and were made fast with lines. The winches began their clatter and roped loads of ten and twelve crates were hoisted from the lighters and deposited in the hungry maws of the holds. The mates shouted orders; the engineers, other than the one on watch, loafed; the men gathered in knots and watched; ordinary seamen hung over the side and painted; cooks and messmen cursed the Spanish policeman assigned to watch the ship for their frequent demands for coffee; the agent's watchman assumed importance and gave orders to the crew, only to receive a cursing that was artistic and complete; Captain Masterson, watching the familiar scene from the bridge deck, felt happy and satisfied in the warm sun.

To the west the blue hills of Spain rolled away. The great crescent bay of Villaneuva del Grao, port of Valencia, spread its protecting wings over the harbor, sheltering the anchored ships from the violent gales, that swooping across the Pyrenees and the Gulf of Lyons from the Bay of Biscay, were delaying and endangering shipping out of land's protection. The rococo warehouses along Grao's waterfront, with their Neptunes and Amphitrites, their Thetises and mermen and mermaids reclining in metal ease, took the rays of the sun in their stained glass windows and shot it in colored filaments to glitter on the dirty water. Valencia, lying against the plain that slowly rose to the hills beyond, reared its hoary Moresque towers and spires to the cloudless blue sky, and basked its white buildings in the autumn sun. White and gray gulls, clamoring hideously, descended in sailing swarms, to pounce upon the refuse and garbage the ship's drains disgorged.

Captain Masterson, leaning thoughtfully against the rail on the bridge deck, felt a pang of melancholy. He was leaving this insouciant life of romance and adventure for respectability and wealth ashore.

He sighed.

II

ABOUT sunset, when stevedores were leaving the *Storm King*, and the hills behind Valencia loomed in large silhouettes against the bloody sky, a messenger rowed to the foot of the accommodation ladder, showed his credentials to the watchmen, and asked to see Captain Masterson. He was told the captain was in the ship's office. He ascended to the bridge deck, removed his hat with the deference of a Latin approaching one who is his superior, and knocked at the screen door.

"Come in," the captain's booming voice sounded from within.

The man entered the office and faced Masterson, who had wheeled around in his swivel-chair at the man's approach. He touched his head in salute, muttered the agent's name, and handed the captain an envelope he held in his hand. The letter was written in Spanish, but Masterson was almost as familiar with the various languages of the Mediterranean and their idiomatic dialects as he was with his own. He read:

Customs officials find error in the visa on tobacco manifests. They request an explanation tomorrow at ten. I shall go with you to the administration de aduanas at that time. Am sure difficulty can be arranged. Bermudez, Agent.

Masterson dismissed the waiting messenger, telling him he would meet the agent next day. He thought about the message. It was strange. An error in the visa. He recalled that the last port contained no Spanish consul, but that the French consul, acting in the capacity of consul of a friendly nation, had placed his seal and stamp on the tobacco manifests. Also, this official had assured him, everything was in accord with the requirements of Spanish customs law. Of course he knew how wary the Spanish were about tobacco. Smugglers frequently brought it into the country via the fishing fleets, but his line was an old and respected one, the pioneer, in fact, among American lines running to the Mediterranean; and to have such an affair come up was unusual. However, he was positive the matter could be easily cleared, and thought little more of it. He continued work on the money for his crew, who waited outside, rabid at the thought of cheap cognac and a night in the fleshpots of Valencia.

After he paid them he ate, dressed, and went ashore, where he met an old friend, one Leopoldo, ship-chandler and veteran Spanish sailor. They sat in a café in Grao over glasses of Pedro Domecq and half-glasses of thick coffee, smoking fragrant cigars. They talked of the sea and their prospects. After the third Pedro Domecq, Masterson grew mellow and eloquent over leaving the sea. Also over his last voyage and his intention to make it a supreme success. He expanded on the subject and told of hoping to make a record run across the Atlantic. Among other things he mentioned the orders of the tobacco importers and the perishable onions. Oh, he would show them how to handle things, he told his friend; and thought fondly of the return to New York and of the admiration he would excite through his skilful handling of a difficult voyage.

"I wonder if you will," said Leopoldo thoughtfully.

"You wonder? Why you know I will, you old cripple. How can you wonder?"

"But I do wonder, my friend."

"And why? Don't you think I am able to?"

"Not that, *mi amigo*, not that. There are other things."

"And what are the 'other things?' "

"Did you not receive a communication from Bermudez tonight?"

"Yes. Why?"

"I do not know, friend Juan, but I would be wary. I think I know what that message contained. I am worried. I fear something you will not like will come out of that message."

"Nothing to that message, Leo, nothing at all. Don't worry about it. Just a slight technical error in the visas that's all. And I'll clear it up in no time."

"I hope you will, Juan."

"Sure I will. By the way, Leo, how are the Buzaglos doing?"

The Buzaglo brothers, of whom the captain asked, lived in Barcelona. From time immemorial their family had been a powerful factor in shipping along the Spanish

Mediterranean coast. They controlled vast sources of raw material. They owned forests and onion farms, and possessed extensive orange groves near Valencia. Formerly they had enjoyed a monopoly of the agencies for American lines at Barcelona, Valencia, Alicante, and Cartagena, but of late their hold had slipped. The U. S.-Arabian Line had been the first to break with them. Masterson had been the cause.

Through his intimate knowledge of the situation and through such friends as Leopoldo, who knew the hard and cold game of shipping well and understood the motives of everyone in it, Masterson had exposed the unscrupulous methods of the Buzaglos. He found that they were diverting the more profitable cargo to foreign lines, by handing the stuff over to the highest bidder. The American lines, more or less new at the business, although retaining the brothers as agents, were losing cargo. They were excluded from the practice because of certain foreign shippers who, fearful that the rich commerce with the states would pass to American hulls, were, other than paying the Buzaglos the bribe they asked, paying them to withhold their offers from American lines. Consequently the Americans lost ground.

Masterson, suspecting something of the sort, had, with the assistance of Leopoldo, uncovered all this; and the U. S.-Arabian Line had transferred its agencies to other hands. Other American companies had followed suit and, with the British coal strike, the Buzaglos found themselves in a difficult position.

British and other ships found it hard to run and pay the bloated price for coal. American lines prospered through cheap coal and oil and the Buzaglos were forced to bring their cargoes to the very agencies they once had occupied. Thus, they lost money. They lost their agent's commissions and the bribe money, and often were unable to move their stuffs, being forced to watch it rot in their warehouses. Naturally they were not fond of Masterson and his line. And their dislike had been changed to hate after an encounter in Barcelona.

On this occasion the two of them approached the captain and, in oily language, asked why they had been discharged.

"I believe you know," Masterson had replied.

"But we do not know, *Capitan,*" the elder Buzaglo had said.

"Then I'll tell you," said Masterson. "You're both a pair of dirty crooks."

The younger brother had attacked the captain and the upshot of the affair was that he knocked them both flat and walked away laughing at them. Their hatred then knew no bounds.

Leopoldo looked at his friend long before answering the question.

"Very well. Oh very well, I suppose," he said. "They are still losing some money, of course, but they are making energetic efforts to come back."

"Well, I hope they go bankrupt," said Masterson. "The thieves. I'd like to poke them again."

Leopodo was sorry, but he must leave.

"Again I warn you, Juan," as they parted. "You may find things very unpleasant. But always remember I am your friend."

Masterson threaded his way through the freight stacked on the dark waterfront to his boatmen. He stepped into the little skiff and was rowed to the *Storm King*. Of course, he thought, Leo's fears were silly. A visa technicality? Nothing at all. And if it was anything the consulate at Valencia or the embassy at Madrid would help him out of the difficulty. No need to worry, he thought, as he ascended to his deck and paused to watch a drunken seaman struggling to climb the accommodation ladder.

He laughed and went into his cabin. He slept soundly.

III

IN A house on the outskirts of Valencia that night three men were in earnest conversation. Two of them were the Buzaglo brothers. The third was Rodriguez, chief of the customs at Valencia, and a venal and corrupt official. They sat at a circular table sipping strong coffee and smoking strong Spanish cigarets. The room was pungent with smoke and close because of the closed and barred windows.

"I informed Bermudez today," said Rodriguez. "He and the American are to meet me tomorrow at ten."

"Very good so far," said the elder Buzaglo. "But what will you do then?

"I shall say the ship cannot move until the matter is arranged at Madrid. It will delay him a week, at least; perhaps more. The only way out before then is for the American embassy to sign papers guaranteeing that the tobacco will not be landed in Spain. But that will not happen. The new staff at the embassy is very cautious and there is no written precedent for them to act in such a case.

"Also, Señores, the thing grows complicated. There may be a fine, a huge fine, or confiscation, or arrest, or a long delay. Any one of them spells ruin. The least, a penalty of delay, will ruin the onions with damp weather coming, and if what you say about the tobacco consignees is true, he cannot make it in time. You see I have done my job well."

And Rodriguez laughed complacently.

"But," said the younger Buzaglo suspiciously, "is this technicality sufficient to warrant the move."

"Quite, my friend. You know how rigorous we are with tobacco. Well, the manifests are not visaed properly. Of course, as you know, everything really is legitimate, but technically—ah, that is different."

"Splendid!" chorused the brothers.

Shipping news travels fast, especially in the Mediterranean. For the peoples living along its shores are subtly telegraphic. Certainly the Latins are. The Greeks know things quickly and the Arabs and Turks are uncanny in hearing of events. As if there had been a radioed message, the news of Masterson's last voyage, his promotion, and the rush orders of tobacco had reached the Buzaglos. The onions, of course, they knew of easily. And the disturbed Leopoldo had heard too.

With this information the Buzaglos had conceived revenge on the hated captain and his line. They had gone to the official, who once had been a clerk in their employ. To delay Masterson, they said; to ruin the onions, hold up the tobacco, and make it impossible to reach New York in the prescribed time, would suit their purposes nicely. But what was this to him? A great deal, if the Buzaglo check book meant anything. It did, but their word was not enough. He must have a contract. So they made a contract, each retaining a copy. It was an agreement so worded that if either side double-crossed the other, exposure would mean ruin. Then they proceeded to business.

But the Buzaglos were willing to forego revenge if they could profit. Revenge alone was cheap, and they knew it. Therefore, they would go to Masterson and intimate that they, and they alone, could obtain his ship's release. But they would obtain it only on condition that he, when he assumed his new duties, would instruct their reinstatement as agents for the line. And, like a miracle, the little error had appeared. Their chance was come. It augured well for them when they left the official's house that night.

Leopoldo had guessed all this. He had seen the Buzaglos in town and wondered, for, after their dismissal as agents they rarely left Barcelona. He liked them no better than Masterson, for they were fighting him in his ship-chandler's business. Seated in his office on Grao's waterfront, he had seen them go to the customs house. Half an hour later they had emerged with Rodriguez and a messenger, who left them and started toward the office of Bermudez. He had followed the messenger. The latter went to the agency and a few moments later a messenger from Bermudez had gone to the *Storm King*. Leopoldo's shrewd mind had guessed the rest. He was right. His friend was in a precarious position.

Next morning Masterson, after leaving the first mate in charge, went ashore and met Bermudez. Together they went to the Customs House. They were admitted by a uniformed doorman and conducted to the office of the chief. Rodriguez greeted them extravagantly.

"Buenos, Capitan Masterson. ¿Como esta? Y Ud. Señor Bermudéz. ¿Hay todo bien con tu? Por mi amigos digo 'a las piez de Uds.'"

After which the good Rodriguez bade them be seated, gave their hats and topcoats to an attendant and ordered coffee. He was further disposed to irrelevant conversation, but Masterson, who well knew that such specious pleasantry might, if tolerated, last all day, abruptly plunged into business.

"I am told, Señor Rodriguez," he said, speaking in Valencian dialect, "that there is an error in the tobacco visa. I should like to know about it."

"Ah that, *Capitan*. So there is, and a slight one, I assure you. I am certain the difficulty can be taken care of easily."

He produced the manifests which were rolled together and bound with a ribbon.

"You see, *Capitan,*" he continued, "Spanish law requires a visa for each manifest. It is quite obvious why this should be. We are plagued with the swinish smugglers in our poor country and we must be careful. But you, *Capitan,* and your esteemed company are, of course, above suspicion. Not for an instant do we suspect anything illegal from you. It is an oversight of course. Anything else is impossible. Ugh! Unthinkable! Have some more coffee."

Masterson, more or less amused at the verbose Rodriguez, but wondering how it would end, passed his cup.

"But," resumed the suave official, "it is essential that the law be complied with. Is it not so? Is it not fair and square, as you Americans say? Here we have but one visa, a blanket one, for fourteen manifests. Each should have a separate visa. The one is, I am sorry to say, insufficient."

"But the consul at Dedeagatch told me it was all right," said Masterson.

"Ah, *Capitan,* but he is French and does not understand all the intricacies of Spanish law. It is regrettable, I assure you, but it can be remedied."

"How?" asked the captain.

"Through the American embassy at Madrid. But one little signed word from there and we waive violation and speed you on your way. All that is necessary is the written declaration of the ambassador declaring you and your line will not land the tobacco in Spain. That is all. It is a small matter to you, perhaps, but we must enforce strictly our laws on tobacco. I must do my duty.

"And must I stay here until the guarantee is received?" asked Masterson.

"I am sorry, *Capitan,* but you must."

Masterson hurried to the consulate. He began to see why Leopoldo had been fearful. He was to be delayed. But surely not for long. It would be cleared up in no time. The asses! As if he would try to smuggle a million and a half dollars of tobacco into Spain. And his line, to say nothing of himself! It was all ridiculous, of course. It would soon be cleared up.

He reached the consulate and told his story. The consul nodded gravely and offered a cigaret. Yes, there were such technicalities in Spanish law and the officials were quite exacting about them. It was strange the captain had not known of it when he allowed the blanket visa. To which the captain replied that if he had known all the intricacies of law in the various countries he might have been a consul. Besides it was the first time such a thing had happened.

The consul was not particularly pleased with the retort, but he answered that he would wire Madrid. And would the captain please write the wire and pay him enough pesetas to cover its expense? Masterson did all that and returned to the ship. The consul told him he might expect a reply in the morning. All right. He would be finished loading then.

At eleven next morning a messenger from the consulate brought Captain Masterson a wire. There was but half a lighter left to be loaded. Masterson, when he saw the boy ascend the accommodation ladder, felt relieved. He could sail that afternoon. He remembered that it was the twenty-seventh. The tobacco was due in the States by the fifteenth of December. Eighteen days in which to cross. Plenty of time. He was glad he had pressed the *Storm King* from Dedeagatch. It gave him more time in such an emergency. He would get her in New York ahead of schedule now. He opened the message.

"Case vague," he read. *"As far as we can see there is no precedent on which to base any action. Request further information. Suggest that you or agent come to Madrid."*

It was signed by an attaché as the ambassador was in Paris.

Masterson was aghast. Madrid was almost two hundred and eighty miles distant by rail. It was an all night trip there. He dared not leave his ship. Not with an idle crew. Then too, he must watch the onions. The weather was growing damp, especially at night, a late autumn condition in the region. They must be watched closely or they would begin to sprout. Ventilators and hatch covers must be handled adroitly. He hurried ashore and to the agency. Bermudez left on the night train to Madrid.

IV

FIVE days later a worried and desperate Captain Masterson went to the consulate for the twentieth time and to the agency for the thirtieth time to see if anything could be done. Evidently nothing could. The American embassy was still searching for a precedent on which to base an action and Bermudez was still trying to help them. The *Storm King* was still at anchor in Grao's harbor and the good citizens of Valencia were buzzing with gossip about the American ship held on a smuggling charge. The customs authorities had sent Masterson a schedule of penalties possible, including all that Rodriguez had mentioned to the Buzaglos, and a few more. The European offices of the U. S.-Arabian Line kept the cables busy to New York, and New York flooded Washington with frantic appeals. Confiscation was hinted at by Rodriguez.

The tobacco importers chafed because their Turkish tobacco was likely to be delayed just as they needed it for the holiday trade. The onion men, both exporters in Spain and importers in the States, cluttered the offices of the company with strong and numerous messages. Still the *Storm King* lay idle. And Captain Masterson was half mad.

On his last trip! To have such a thing happen and on the eve of his promotion. It certainly was ironical. He paced the bridge deck in anguish. Below, the crew, enjoying their holiday, were pitching *centimos* with the Spanish policemen, or playing poker in the forecastle. Masterson stopped to watch the game on the main deck. Perhaps they might withdraw the offer of promotion now. Perhaps he might even be discharged. Perhaps anything might happen. He thought of other companies that had, at previous times, sought his services, and wondered if they would want him now. He knew how relentless shipping companies were and how rigidly responsible they held their masters for anything and everything that might happen. He entered the ship's office and smoked another cigaret. There must be some way. Some way out of this thing. It was terrible. Surely he could get out of it some way. A knock interrupted his train of thought.

"Come in," he said absently.

"Buenos dias, Capitan Masterson. ¿Como esta?"

At the voice Masterson whirled around in his swivel-chair and leaned forward. The Buzaglos! *Flash!* He understood now.

"Well, what do you want?" he asked.

"Merely to ask how *el Capitan* is faring and to exchange a few words in pleasant conversation," said the elder Buzaglo.

"And surely *el Capitan* is well and business is as ever," said the younger.

"Oh quite," he said rather drily.

He watched them narrowly as they took seats and lit cigarets. He understood now. They were at the bottom of the whole affair. He recalled that Rodriguez had once been in their employ. So old Leo was right after all, but, true to his Latin instincts had kept quiet because he was not sure. He might have thought of the Buzaglos before. They held the key to the situation and expected to get something out of it. Well, he would not give it.

"But the *Storm King* is delayed, is it not, *Capitan?*" asked the elder.

"Evidently," said Masterson.

"And why?"

"For an obvious reason, is it not, at least to you?"

"But why for me? Or I suppose my brother and me, you mean," said the elder.

Masterson was thinking fast. He might at least find out what they wanted. He needed all the information he could get.

"Oh come," he said. "You know all about it, surely. You know there is an error in the visas."

"Yes, we had heard that."

"Well, they accuse me of smuggling, or something of the sort. It's preposterous."

"Smuggling!" chorused the brothers.

"But, *Capitan,*" said the younger in an aggrieved tone, "that is a serious charge."

"So it seems," said Masterson.

"Is there anything we can do?" asked the elder.

"Is there?" countered the captain.

The Buzaglos looked at him meaningly. He returned their gaze.

"Perhaps there is," the elder brother said. "Perhaps. Of course we do not countenance smuggling, but we might arrange a customs difficulty."

"Well?"

"Yes we might, *Capitan.* But we hear

you are to be made manager of operations. Is it not so?"

"It was. I don't know now."

"And we also hear that you must be in New York by the fifteenth."

"That's right."

"Well, my friend, we might arrange it so that the *Storm King* could sail tonight or in the morning. A word from us to Señor Rodriguez would be sufficient."

"Sufficient at Madrid?" asked the captain.

"Absolutely. They will abide by his decision. He is responsible here."

"Well?"

"But surely you, Captain Masterson," said the younger brother, coming forward like an actor who has heard his line, "would say something for the Buzaglos if we did so."

"What do you want?"

"Well, we are not agents any more. We would like to be. We are losing money, as you know. And you, as manager of operations might be able to help us. We help you; you help us. Is it not fair?"

"But suppose I cannot do that?"

"Then, *Capitan grande,* we can hold you here until the onions rot and the tobacco is mildewed. Do you hear?"

The elder Buzaglo delivered this speech, arising as he did so. He discarded his suaveness and assumed belligerency. It was a threat. And he ought to have known better than to threaten John Masterson. But the captain was calm.

"Indeed?" he said. "And you two have me where you want me, eh?"

"*El Capitan* is not a fool," said the younger.

"That I'm not," answered Masterson, arising. "One moment."

He whistled in the speaking tube that led to the third mate's quarters. He was answered.

"Send me Olmquist and Knute," he commanded. And to the brothers, "One moment please, Señores."

There appeared at the door two giants, both Swedes, stolid of countenance and powerful in build. They entered at Masterson's command and stood with bared heads, awaiting orders. For years the captain had known them. They were A. B. seamen and had long been his particular men when he wanted anything.

"These two gentlemen," said Masterson, "have threatened me. I dealt with them once in Barcelona. I leave it to you men, as my most trusted seamen, to deal with them now. You know what to do, and I suggest that when you put them off they do not use the accommodation ladder."

And he turned to his desk.

Olmquist and Knute moved to their task. The suave Buzaglos raged and stormed, called down the curses of heaven on the head of the captain and swore they would ruin him and his company. Their furious tirade was cut short when the two Swedes, neither amused nor excited, picked them up and carried them out. Down the ladder to the main deck they went with their burdens, and strode to the rail, interrupting the game of pitching *centimos*. Without further ado they calmly launched the squirming Buzaglos into Grao's dirty harbor and returned to their poker game in the forecastle.

The policemen, walking the platform in front of Grao's rococo warehouses, pulled the two plotters out, spitting and wheezing, dripping with slimy, oily water, and covered with the filth of the harbor.

SO, THOUGHT Masterson, when he had stopped laughing, that was the situation. There might be a way out now. The brothers were paying Rodriguez. That was certain. But how could he prove it? And he must work fast. The official would deny, of course. No use accusing bluntly. Proof, proof, that was it, and he must have it quickly. But how to get the proof? Rodriguez, thought Masterson (and he drew on knowledge gained in years' experience here), would not do such a thing unless he had assurance of pay. Assurance of pay must be other than verbal. It must be written. Both the Buzaglos and Rodriguez would have demanded that. Too much was at stake. It was impossible to obtain the contract from the Buzaglos. But with Rodriguez he might succeed. Some way. Some way now.

Leopoldo knew the customs chief, knew him fairly well, and Leo had offered his services.

Masterson looked at his watch. Midday. If he could get away with it, he could sail next day. That left thirteen days to New York. He could make it, he thought, if reports from the Eiffel Tower continued to tell of fairly even weather in the middle Atlantic. But he must act promptly.

He sent a messenger ashore. Leopoldo returned with him.

The two sat in conference for a long time. Leopoldo left, saying he would return before six. If Leo could only find out! He spent the afternoon in feverish anticipation. About five the punctual Leo appeared. He was smiling.

"There is a written contract, Juan," said Leo.

"Where does he keep it?" asked Masterson.

"On his person," returned Leo. "He is a bombastic fool. He is greedy and shrewd, but he is conceited and stupid also. I flattered him. We drank. The wine loosened his tongue. I flattered him further. I told him he was wise enough to make a great deal out of his office and he told me he was doing so. He hinted first, then told me confidentially about the deal. He imagines himself the center of a huge intrigue and that he has the Buzaglos where he wants them. I cannot understand why either they or he would be so stupid as to write and sign such a thing. But they were."

"I thought he would carry it with him," said Masterson. "But did you persuade him to go with you this evening."

"I did. We are to take to El Teatro Morejon early. There will be much wine and cognac."

"You're marvelous, Leo," beamed Masterson. "Now let's have a cognac ourselves."

When Leo left he had full instructions.

V

THERE is a splendid old cathedral in Valencia. You come upon it unexpectedly at the end of a narrow, tortuous street that winds about aimlessly and for no reason ends at the cathedral. And there it is, with small, unsightly dwellings encroaching upon its dignified presence. Above its door, to show that the Latin, the Mediterranean Latin, has had something to do with it, are stone seraphim and cherubim flitting about, and a stone Virgin standing sedately, watching the faithful enter. There are massive wooden doors, inches thick, supported by wrought-iron braces, that must be pushed with laborious effort before one may enter. Once inside, its cruciform interior differs little from that of any other similar church, with the exception that, flanking the doors at either end of the transept (you usually enter the one at the base of the nave) are tremendous paintings.

These paintings depict, in chromatic realism, far more than life-size, some gruesome incidents in the history of Christianity. One of them, for instance, is of St. Peter before the inverted cross, inspecting the nails and the emplacement of his instrument of torture; another is of a person on a wrack of the inquisition, being slowly split in two, while yet another is of the disembowelling of a man in all its gory reality, the expression of acute agony on the suffering face being particularly terrible.

Yet you stand before these horrors, fascinated, as does the Spaniard. Perhaps it is the color that draws you, perhaps it is the artistic merit, but more probably it is the morbid attraction that holds. And, should you enter the cathedral at night, these paintings assume a weird appearance in the flickering light of numerous candles, while the hollow and inexplicable sounds of the great and ancient structure sound in your awed ears.

On, or about midnight, following his conversation with Leo, Captain Masterson alighted from a tram that had borne him the two miles from Grao to Valencia, and walked toward the cathedral. Under his arm he carried a package. The streets were almost deserted, for Valencia is not a particularly gay town. Here and there he passed doors from which issued sounds of maudlin laughter and American jazz, or the strains of a Spanish schottische, but they were few. Now and then he passed a straggler, shuffling along the darkened streets, as muffled in the damp chill of the late autumn night as seemed the houses with their boarded windows and doors.

He approached the cathedral and walked up to the huge doors at the base of the nave. He paused an instant under the overhanging lentil, looked up, pushed through the portals, and entered. The cathedral was deserted. He walked softly up the nave, past flickering shrines and holy images, to where the transept crossed. There, beside a confession box directly below one of the great pictures, he stopped. For a moment he stood in reflection. There was something impressive and moving in the somber dignity of this shadowy place. Captain Masterson was a realist, an American, but at that moment he felt the power of a faith which has moved its Latin adherents through the centuries. He turned, and carrying the package, went back the way he had come.

At the great portals he paused again. He opened the package. From it he took a garment of dark cloth, which, when he drew it over his head, veiled his figure in mysterious formlessness which merged with the surrounding dark. The cowl came over his head. His face was scarcely visible, almost ghostly.

SHORTLY after Masterson alighted from the tram, Leopoldo and Rodriguez were seated in a café but a few squares from the cathedral. The customs official was drunk.

"My dear Rodriguez," said Leopoldo. "After such a night of revelry, do you not think it meet that we repair to the cathedral for prayers and forgiveness?"

"An excellent idea, good Leopoldo," said the tipsy Rodriguez, talking thickly, "but the old place has such a haunted look. I recall going there one evening and being nearly frightened to death merely by the looks of it. I was well relieved when I left the musty old barn."

"Talk not of the holy places with disrespect, my friend. After such a speech it is doubly necessary that we go and pray. It will give you peace of mind and soul. Besides, am I not with you, and are you not enough man to laugh at such fears of ghosts and the like?"

"Perhaps you are right, Leopoldo. I recall that blasphemous Garcia and his untimely death. Let us go."

Leopoldo paid for the wine and they went out into Valencia's chill night. They walked up the narrow street, where, but a short time before, the master of the *Storm King* had made his secret way. A wan moon cast long shadows in the gloomy thoroughfare. No one was about. They walked up to the massive doors. Leopoldo was steering the reeling Rodriguez, whose teeth were chattering, partly from the chill and partly from fright. They pushed their way in.

"*Por Dios* Leopoldo," said the customs official in a tremendous whisper. "This is unearthly."

"Be still, fool," whispered Leopoldo. "You are in the cathedral."

Silence then, as they walked slowly up the nave, a silence broken only by the muffled and mysterious noises that came from the high walls, the dark beams, and the hanging draperies. They came to the transept. A candle sputtered. The great pictures loomed horribly, their terrible scenes changing form in the flickering light. Rodriguez clung to Leopoldo.

"Let us pray and get it over. Let us go quickly," he said shivering. "I would sooner seek forgiveness in daylight. Those paintings——"

They did not delay. They went, for Rodriguez was not the man to face bravely those mysteries he avoided whenever possible, and feared abjectly when he must. He led the way. They hurried, Leopoldo trailing without protest. They passed through the huge, shadowed entrance to the street. There, as the door swung behind them, Rodriguez abruptly stopped and shivered and uttered a quavering, high-pitched cry.

"Who seeks the cathedral at this hour?" a booming voice issued from the darkness of the narrow street and echoed against the stone figures above. Dimly, a figure more dark than the surrounding night stood forth, appalling and terrible.

"'Tis I, Blasco Rodriguez, and my friend, Francisco Leopoldo, who came for prayer," answered the terrified customs official.

Silence.

"Where is he, Leopoldo?" whispered Rodriguez, clinging to his companion.

Leopoldo was silent.

The face of the figure was dim in the folds of the cowl and, to the quaking Rodriguez, to whom it slowly became visible out of the darkness, might well have been that of a spectre, or the Reaper himself.

"Wretches!" came the voice from the cowl. "How dare you defile this holy place with your drunken presence? I have watched you. I have seen your reeling forms stagger over its sacred floor. Swine!"

"*Madre de Dios!*" whispered Rodriguez.

A white hand emerged from the shadows; an extending finger pointed to the stone street pavement.

"Pray for forgiveness!" commanded the awful voice.

The robed figure loomed above Rodriguez. Suddenly he found speech. "I pray forgiveness for this night!" he cried. "It was the sinful Leopoldo who led me into evil and brought me here. But even I am a poor sinner. I pray forgiveness!"

Rodriguez froze with terror as the figure's hand moved toward him. He thought he screamed, but the sounds in his throat were but whispers. "Forgiveness! I have done wrong. I must prepare myself. I am not ready to die."

Rodriguez felt the pale hands at his throat. He struggled. Panic gripped him. He tried to scream. His voice deserted him utterly . . .

THIN wisps of light diluted the darkness. Standing close to the house wall, a house in a quarter far removed from the cathedral, Captain Masterson struck a match. Leopoldo held to the flickering illumination the papers he bore. The topmost read:

"We, Manuel Buzaglo and Pedro Buzaglo, agree to pay to Blasco Rodriguez the sum of 1000 pesetas in return for which he, Blasco Rodriguez, shall delay in any way he may see fit, and as long as he is able, the American ship known as the Storm King, *whose master is John Masterson. He shall exercise his influence in this manner until we, Manuel Buzaglo and Pedro Buzaglo, command him to release the said ship, when we shall pay him an additional 1000 pesetas.*

The signatures of the three men were on the document.

Masterson and Leopoldo looked at each other.

"It is settled then, my friend," spoke Leopoldo.

Captain Masterson smiled. "It is settled," he repeated.

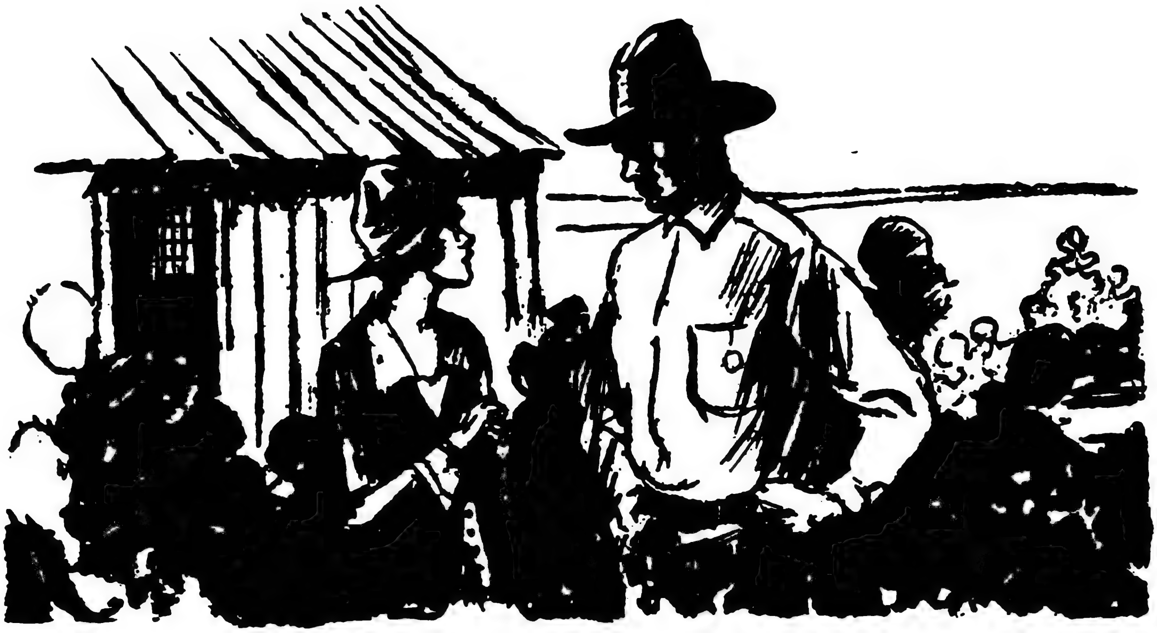
Leopoldo laughed softly. "Rodriguez was quite sober when you released him at the cathedral. I doubt very much that he knew you had ever touched his pockets. Surely, he thought, this night he would die, strangled by the unknown. He was in an extremity of terror indeed, my friend."

"I sail tomorrow at noon," said Masterson. "I am sure that by a full hour before that time, Madrid will be informed that the customs office was in grave error, and the way clear. Rodriguez will never dare breathe a word about what happened tonight—not while I hold this paper."

Masterson smiled. "But when he is alone, and the liquor has died, he is going to do much thinking, and wondering."

THE sun set over the sky line. The clear winter sky was drenched with color, just above the buildings. The towers of lower Broadway stood silhouetted against the west. Millions of windows emitted light. Liberty raised her torch in welcome. A few gulls sailed low on the water. The *S. S. Storm King* sailed up the bay.

Captain Masterson, on his last voyage, had brought her home in time from a successful trip.



The Road to PALO ALTO

By J. E. GRINSTEAD

CHAPTER I

IN THE BIG THICKET

IN THE southern point of Texas there used to be a thicket of mesquite, catclaw, prickly-pear cactus and other thorny shrubs that was as big as an ordinary state. It is still there, but has been trimmed some around the edges, like a soldier's hair.

Palo Alto was a cowtown. *The* cowtown, in fact, for it had no competitor for many miles around. A waggish cowboy said they called the place Palo Alto—literally, Timbered Hill—because it was a live-oak mot, and by climbing the tallest tree, one could see over the nearest pear thicket. There wasn't much hill about it, still it was higher ground than the endless miles of coastal plain that surrounded it. The old 'dobe town was five miles from the Rio Grande. Far enough that there was no danger that a *banco de rio* would change the course of the stream and throw the town into Mexico, yet near enough to receive all manner of contraband. In a word, Palo Alto was a Mexican town in Texas. There was little but homemade law in that part of the country, so each citizen carried a copy of Judge Colt's digest of the statutes on his hip. Nice place, yes!

Mid-afternoon of a late fall day saw a dozen riders come storming into the sandy street of Palo Alto. They were cowboys all, guns, spurs, chaps and so forth, and a hard-bitted mob at that.

"I'll bet four bits, and put up half the money," said Chub Riley, the bartender at the Green Tree saloon, as he stood in the door watching them, "that Old Notey Beney has gone to the state for something."

"I ain't takin' the bet," replied the monte dealer, who was standing near. "Old Notey Beney would have to have a whole lot of business back in the state, before he'd wear out the grease on the axles of his old buckboard by making a trip like that. More likely—dang his stingy Scotch soul!—he has sent the whole outfit to head off one doggy yearling that he's afraid will swim the river and get into Mexico. I wouldn't bet on Notey Beney if I had a cinch. If I knowed what he was going to do he'd be apt to do something else."

"Huh! That's true, too. Anyway, we

A complete novelette of that strange section of Texas, the prickly pear country, where, in the impenetrable thickets, lurk men who seek inviolable refuge from the law

got one more sweet day's business ahead of us," and Chub stepped behind his bar to get ready for the rush.

That Green Tree saloon was a sweet and lovely place. The front of this only two-story building in the town was adorned with an alleged picture of a tree. It was at least green. A shade of green to which no tree ever attained, no matter what was the matter with it! In addition to the tree, there were two legends: *Arbol de Fresco*, and plain, Green Tree. The idea was that those who could read either English or Spanish could find the place by reading the signs, those who could read neither might find it by the tree. The blind could easily find it by the noise and smell—it was that rank.

The cowboys dismounted in front of the Green Tree, ready and anxious for what they called a day of pleasure. What that mob would look like when night came, how many of them would be alive, and what wild things they would do, was a problem that only the passing hours could solve. They were all white men—of a sort. In the whole gang there were but four outstanding characters. The rest were just the mill-run of the ranges. One of these four was Page Cothran, who seemed to be the tentative leader of the expedition. He was a wonderfully handsome, dark-skinned, heavy-set young fellow, with flashing brown eyes and long dark mustache. Cothran was better clad and better mounted than any of the others. His clothes were fine, the *conchas* on his *chaperejos* were Mexican half dollars. The silver-mounted gun at his belt had a pearl handle. All in all, Mr. Cothran was the typical range dandy. Another of the four was Cliff Lea. He was tall, angular, gray-eyed, good enough features but not handsome, and almost saturnine of countenance. He rarely spoke unless spoken to. His collar was too large, and his sleeves too short. His chaps hung low at the waist, and yet were halfway to his boot tops. He was so quiet and reticent that it never occurred to anyone that the reason his clothes fitted him in that manner was that he was very much of a man. Lea seemed to be playing a poor second fiddle to Cothran, as leader of the gang. The fact was that the gang had an invisible rift in it, and Lea was leader of the minority—except when he wanted to lead the whole works.

The other two men were one piece. They

were inseparable side-partners, and recognized no authority save that of Cliff Lea. The only names anyone knew for them, in the pear country, were Red and Coley. Coley had the features of a Greek god, and was so dark one might have taken him for an Indian. Red had the facial expression of a scrambled egg, and was so red that one might have taken him for—why, anything, red, except perhaps a rose.

THE gang filed into the Green Tree, lined up at the bar, and ordered drinks. There had never been any ice in Palo Alto, even in the winter time. The beer was foamy suds, and the whisky was terrible. Two things happened while the bartender was serving the drinks. One was that Cliff looked straight at him with those level gray eyes, and the barkeep reached back and got a different bottle for the lank puncher. The other was that as they stood together, Red said to his partner:

"Yo' time, Coley. Go as far as you like," and then to the man behind the bar, "Gimme a bottle of plain soda for a chaser, Chub."

The partners were carrying out an inviolable rule that was fixed between them. Never did they both get drunk at the same time. They didn't consider it safe, in that country. No one ever suspected this, for the one who stayed sober was usually the wildest, most hilarious of the two, and made the greatest show of drinking.

The orgy began with a few rounds of drinks at the bar. Then Page Cothran made for the stair leading to the dance hall.

"Nobody up there but the Professor," offered Chub. "He's tuning his piano, and——"

"Better get somebody up there," snapped Cothran. "We aim to have a little dance."

"Don't have dances in the daytime," protested Chub.

"All right. We'll stop up the windows and make it all the same like night. If anybody tries to stop us, we'll make it *all* night, for them, *muy pronto!*"

Page, followed by his faction, clumped up the stair to the dance hall, and the sweet day's business was begun. Dance-hall girls were roused from somewhere, a mixed lot of white girls and Mexican señoritas. A few bullets through the roof decided the "Professor" to suspend operations on his piano and furnish music for a dance. Mexican boys scuttled up and down the stair with drinks from the bar—and the revel was begun.

Red and Coley had gone into the gambling room back of the barroom, and were bucking the monte game. Cliff Lea was with them, sweating the game. Cliff had plenty of sporting blood, but just now his mind was too busy with other problems, so he said he was broke. He settled down to watch the luck of the partners, apparently, but his face was toward the door leading to the barroom.

Pandemonium reigned about the Green Tree until far into the afternoon. Then Page Cothran called the gang all down into the barroom, and lined them up at the bar.

Cliff Lea rose, stretched his lean body, and said, "Come on boys, it's time to ride."

The three passed into the barroom and lined up with the others, who were preparing to take a drink.

"Get in here fellers," called Page. "This is little recess. We're going back to hard lessons, hilarity and hell, after we take a few real drinks."

Cliff Lea had taken a position right by the side of Page, who was already pretty well loaded. Page looked down and saw that Cliff had poured his drink, out of deference to the house, but was not taking it.

"Lap up yo' poison, Cliff," commanded Page.

"I don't want it," replied Cliff.

"Hell you don't! It ain't what you want that does you good, it's what you get. Mean you won't drink with the rest of the outfit?"

"I mean I won't drink with anybody, now."

"You just think you won't," and Page's ornate gun flashed from the holster, and was trained on Cliff Lea, "lap her up, and don't take no chaser."

Cliff didn't offer to draw his gun. There was no chance. Instead, he simply put out his hand and pushed the weapon to one side, just as Page pulled the trigger. The bullet cut a mark across the top of the bar, and went on into the big mirror behind it.

"Put that gun up, Page," said Cliff, calmly. "We got to get back to the ranch. Mr. Brannum is likely to get back tonight, and——"

"Yes," snarled Page, holstering his gun, "I reck'n you know a helluva lot about what Old Notey Beney's apt to do."

"I know what he's apt to do if he comes home and finds the whole outfit off on a drunk," said Cliff, "and so do you. Get the boys out of here, and let's get going."

"All right, fellows," called Page, as if it were his own idea, "Lap up another round to keep you warm on the road, and let's ride."

Five minutes later the mob was riding out of town with Indian yells, and a fusillade of shots. Chub, the barkeep, and his monte dealer stood in the door watching them. Red and Coley were helping bring up the rear, but behind them all rode the tall, grim-faced Cliff Lea.

"Page Cothran is going to put that gun stuff over once too often, someday," commented the monte dealer.

"Aw, hell! You're worse'n a old woman," sneered Chub. "Page was drinking some, and——"

"And started to do something that he'd like to do when he's sober. That Cliff Lea has got more cold nerve than any hombre I ever saw, and I seen some cold ones. I seen Cliff's eyes, too, when he pushed that gun away. Can't make out why he didn't drill Page, right then. I seen plenty men killed, right here in the Green Tree, for a whole lot less than Page done. First thing Old Notey Beney knows, he won't have no handsome little pet left."

"Old Notey Beney do sorty pet Page," mused Chub. "I wonder why. He never did pet nobody else in his life, I reck'n."

"Yes, he pets him. I don't know what for, and I don't care. I can tell the world one thing. There's a fine mess of hell brewing, right in the middle of the Notey Beney outfit, and——"

"Let her brew," laughed Chub. "It ain't my funeral. I ain't crazy about Mister Cliff Lea. If he'd let them boys alone I'd a got a real piece of money out of 'em before morning. I don't give a hoot how much hell they raise among themselves, so they don't start the war in my place and bust up my bar bottles and the like."

"How long has Cliff been with the Notey Beney outfit?"

"Year or two," replied Chub.

"Red and Coley's been there longer than that, ain't they?"

"Hell, yes! They been there since before the last big rain, and don't nobody recollect when that was."

THE gang of riders galloped on along the worn trail. At times this trail ran straight for a few hundred yards, across some open glade. At other places it wound through groves of wonderful mesquite, all festooned with the long yellow bean pods that were such rich food for cattle. Again, the trail would wind through a mile of pear and catclaw chaparral, tortuous as a snake with the cramps. The horses galloped steadily on. Their riders might be a bit hazy in their minds, but the ponies knew they were going to the ranch.

That ranch, the headquarters of which was in a grove of immense, moss-hung liveoaks, a little way from the Big Bend of the Nueces River, had several names. It had been originally christened *El Rancho de la Floresta,* the Ranch of the Forest. This name had been given it by Neil Brannum's wife, when she was young. Before the great thicket had choked the romance from her soul and finally killed her. American cowboys had dubbed the name Floresty. Sometimes it was called the N B ranch, just as any other ranch would be called by its brand. The favorite name for it, however, was the Notey Beney. This name was originated by a cowboy who happened to have enough education to know what N. B. stood for. He had coupled this with one of Brannum's characteristics. Neil Brannum's idea of being square was to put the other fellow on notice, and then do as he pleased. If he meant to kill a man, he gave him fair warning, then went for his gun. So, in the passing years the old ranchman had become known throughout the Big Thicket as Notey Beney. Not that anybody ever called him that to his face. They called him Mister Brannum.

The cowboys reached the ranch without mishap, just before sunset, and turning their horses loose went to the bunkhouse. The drunker ones sought their bunks. Those who were sober enough, including Red, Coley, and Cliff Lea, sat about talking. Page Cothran went to the cookshack to get some strong coffee. He wasn't expecting the boss to return, but there was no telling what Old Notey Beney might do. Page wasn't foreman of the ranch, but he was a sort of *vecero,* and Old Neil Brannum's pet. Page knew that but for Cliff Lea they would have all still been at Palo Alto. He knew, too, that it would have been bad for them if the boss came home and found them all away on a carouse. Still, he resented Cliff's treating him as if he were a boy, and he had a good deal else against Cliff. The monte dealer had been right. There was the makings of trouble in the Notey Beney outfit.

Chub was right. Brannum had been "back in the state," as the people of the pear country said when any one went back into the more populous part of Texas. The monte dealer was right also, when he said "Brannum would have to have a heap of business back in the state," to make such a trip. He had. That business was no less than going to San Antonio to meet his granddaughter, Ruth Brannum, and bring her home to the ranch. She had spent the summer with a classmate, because it didn't suit Brannum to meet her sooner.

So, as the cowboys rode back to the ranch, a jangling old buckboard was approaching it from the opposite direction. Old Neil Brannum sat bolt upright on the seat, getting the utmost atom of speed out of the two half-wild mustangs that he drove. He didn't talk. Neil Brannum rarely spoke, except to tell someone what he could or could not, or what he must or must not do.

By Brannum's side sat a young girl, apparently in her late teens. From time to time she gripped the iron rod at the end of the seat in fear, as they took a short curve around a pear thicket. An old Mexican, recognizing the gruff, heavy-handed old ranchman as they came meeting him, spurred his horse into a pocket in a clump of pear, and swept his sombrero from his head. The team flashed by, and Brannum didn't even so much as turn his head toward the lone rider by the wayside. The Mexican caught a glimpse of two great, pleading blue eyes, in the face of an angel, and thinking he had seen the Madonna, crossed himself devoutly and rode on. Surely *El Capitan* Brannum had stolen this angel, he thought. No lovely woman like that would go to *El Rancho de la Floresta* of her own accord. He knew the place, and he knew Old Neil Brannum—too well to understand a lovely woman going to live there.

The buckboard jangled on, following the winding road. Across the Nueces and on through the thicket it went. Ruth Brannum was not going to the old ranch for the first time. She had spent her childhood there, but it had been different then. Her father was living, and she was always with him. For six years now, ever since her father's death, she had been away at school without once returning. Now, she was going home. Home? Yes, it was the only home she knew, and so far as she knew, Old Neil Brannum was the only relative she had on earth.

It was late dusk, almost dark, when she saw what seemed to be miles of whitewashed walls, gleaming through the openings in the big grove. The glimpses of white through the interstices in the green trees suggested the monuments in a cemetery. Ruth shuddered at the thought. She was going to be literally buried alive, here in the heart of the great thicket. This thought was still in her mind when the conveyance stopped at a broad entrance in the south wall of the sepulchral old house.

A Mexican boy materialized from nowhere, and caught the team by the bridles. Brannum climbed stiffly from the seat, but made no offer to assist Ruth. As he turned in through the passage, which led to a great patio, a wrinkled old Mexican woman ran to the side of the vehicle, holding out her hands and chattering all sorts of greetings and endearments. Rosita had been Ruth's nurse until she had gone away to school. She had been faithful, and would continue faithful unto death. If anyone thought he could wean Rosita from her mistress, he would be mistaken. The old duenna fussed about, ordering a crippled Mexican man and buxom Mexican woman to carry the two trunks in. Then she literally bore her mistress to her own old room, which had been kept swept, garnished and ready for her return, all these years.

Old Neil Brannum went to the dining-room and ate alone. He gave no sign that he expected to see Ruth at table. Afterward, he went back to the bare old living-room, its ceiling beams browned by the smoke of many winters. The evening was chilly, and a fire burned in the wide fireplace. Lighting his pipe, Brannum sat before the fire, the ruddy light falling on his grim face. He was a big man. A scant five foot ten in height, but broad and thick, with a bull neck, and great hairy arms. His face was rugged. His thick, bushy brows came together and turned down in a point over his prominent, bony nose. This gave the appearance of a perpetual frown, while his deep-set, cold gray eyes seemed darting daggers at the world. He was tired, now, and ached in every joint from the long return journey, which had taken the better part of three days. He was sixty-five. There were but a few more of his allotted three-score-and-ten years left. He must set his affairs in order for the end. He was thinking of those things as he sat smoking, and staring into the fire.

NEIL BRANNUM'S life had been an eventful one, but there had been little comedy to relieve the tragedy of it. He had no sense of humor, and had been lost from the start on the mazy trail of life. He didn't know how to laugh, or even smile. He had never had time to learn. He had been one of a large family, reared in painful poverty in the Scottish Highlands. At eighteen he had left that country, penniless. He had made his way to Liverpool, and from there sailed as a stowaway on a ship bound for America. A few days out, he was discovered and made to work his passage. Thus he began a life that was rougher than anything he had known.

That ship was bound for America, all right, but not for New York or Boston, of which he had heard. It finally landed at Indianola, on the coast of Texas. Neil went ashore and began casting about for some means of keeping soul and body together. He discovered that apparently all the land and all the sheep in the world were in Texas. The first great boom of the sheep industry in Texas was at its high spot. There was limitless unfenced range, grass for the grazing, and nothing to pay. Old Jack Ricks owned uncounted thousands of sheep. He gave the immigrant boy a job as herder. Pretty soon, Ricks discovered that this young Scot was a wizard with sheep, so he said to him:

"Neil, you're too good to waste your time with one little flock. If you'll take 'em back up the country a ways, I'll stake you to two thousand sheep, and let you pick 'em. I'll give you half the wool and half the increase."

"Up the country a ways," in those days, meant on the upper Nueces. Neil Brannum took the two thousand sheep and drove them to a country that no one knew much about. After four years, he sold his interest for more money than he had ever dreamed of seeing. During those years, Brannum had dreamed a lot, while following his flocks, but he had done more than dream. He had acquired ten sections of land, which he bought very cheap, and which gave him ten miles frontage on the Nueces river. Also, he had discovered that it was the cowmen who were the kings and barons in Texas. He'd be a cowman. He'd establish a baronial estate here in the wilds of Texas, and would own more land than there was in all the Scottish Highlands. So, with that thought in his mind, he married a wife at Indianola. She was an orphan, and had no connections. Neil was a thrifty soul, and wanted no hangers-on.

To the first 'dobe house, the great room where he now sat, he had taken his bride. Since then the house had been extended around the patio. Brannum had prospered. His herds had increased until he had no idea how many cattle he owned. He now had twenty miles frontage on the river, and his land extended out almost to Palo Alto, but his dreams had not come true. There would be no house of Brannum in America. His wife had borne him one son, and then died. Choked to death by the pear thickets, and Brannum never even suspected it. The son had grown to manhood, a frail, narrow-shouldered, flat-chested young fellow. He had no love for the ranch, though he lived there what time he was not in school. The son's wife had been a lovely young thing, who died when Ruth was born. The son had stayed on there at the ranch, with his little daughter, until Ruth was twelve, and then he had died.

Still meaning to be fair, Old Neil had sent his granddaughter to school, and given her every advantage, except love, and he didn't know how to give that. Now, he had brought her home—for a purpose of his own. A purpose that none but a man who had led such a life as Neil Brannum's had been could ever have conceived.

As Brannum sat staring into the fire, he ran over all these things in his mind. He had established a house in the wilds of the great thicket. It was about time for him to go and leave it. It wouldn't be called the house of Brannum, when he was gone, but he meant to have a hand in the ordering of it. Ruth would inherit all his wealth, but he had picked her a man and was preparing to mate them with no more sentiment than he mated the horses and cattle on his ranch. He had so long said, do this or do that, had so domineered those about him, that he had no thought that this lovely granddaughter of his might refuse to love where he bade her. That she might have a little of the Brannum iron in her own character.

The fire died out. Old Neil Brannum knocked the ashes from his pipe, laid it on the mantel and went to bed. He hadn't given Ruth notice of his purpose, yet, but he would do it, in good time. Gentle breezes sighed over the big thicket, and the world knew nothing of what was happening, or might happen, down there in the heart of the pear country.

CHAPTER II

FIRST BLOOD

RUTH slept soundly and late, after her long journey. Rosita, bearing a cup of coffee, peeped into her room at sunrise, but seeing that the girl was still asleep, she stole silently away. Ruth woke a few minutes later, stared at the whitewashed walls a moment, then remembered where she was. She had not been accustomed to a servant waiting at her bedside with a cup of coffee when she woke, so she didn't miss Rosita.

A few minutes later, clad for the morning, Ruth stepped out into the old patio, then stopped and caught her breath. She had forgotten the place, in her six years exile. She had been accustomed to trimly kept lawns, box hedges and a few flowers, where she had been at school, but had forgotten that there was anything on earth like this. A fountain played in the middle of the great court, the water falling into a square pool that had walls of rough masonry. Near the pool stood an orange tree, laden with fruit and blossoms. The air was fragrant with the odor of the sweet *resada* and other semitropical flowering shrubs, while dewdrops hung from the petals of wonderful roses.

"Surely grandfather can't be as gruff and unloving as he seems," she said to herself, "or he wouldn't keep the place like this."

What Ruth didn't know was that this wonderful garden was a monument to the woman who had planted the first flower in it, and to the one son that she had borne, both long since dead. Old Neil Brannum never looked upon it as a thing of beauty. It was merely his idea of being fair to the memory of his wife and son, just as anyone else would have kept up a cemetery lot. To him, it was that, and also it was a constant reminder of the death of all his dreams. Anyone supposing that there was, or ever had been, a soft spot in Brannum's heart, made a dreadful mistake.

Ruth stole across the court to the old dining-room. She saw no one but Rosita, who slipped noiselessly in at the same moment, and set Ruth's breakfast. Ruth had not forgotten the Spanish of her childhood, and she began questioning Rosita in her native tongue.

"Is there no one else in the house but me?" she asked.

"Teresa the cook, and Old Andreas, who keeps the yard and makes the fires, are here," replied Rosita.

"But where is grandfather?"

"He went away with the men, at daylight, and didn't say when he would be back."

Thus began the first part of Old Neil Brannum's hideous plan. He was going to let his granddaughter get good and lonesome, and then provide company of his own choosing for her. He had known what it was to go for months without hearing the sound of any human voice save his own, and no sound but the bleating of sheep, except the rattle of snakes and the howling of wolves. He recalled how soul-hungry he had got in the first days of his exile. He remembered that the veriest bum would have seemed to him a prince, and the commonest drab almost an angel. He couldn't subject Ruth to such an acid test as that, but a few days in the silent old house, with three equally silent Mexican servants, would answer his purpose very well.

No one had seen Ruth upon her arrival,

except the Mexican boy who took the team, and the three house servants, so there was no chance for gossip among the men about her. They didn't know she was on earth. They were not surprised when Old Notey Beney routed them before daylight and took the whole outfit to an outlying ranch cabin and pens. Neither were they surprised that he kept them there three days, doing work that was apparently unnecessary. Those who knew him were never surprised at anything he might do, no matter how crazy it was.

By afternoon of the third day, Ruth could bear the house and the patio no longer. The beautiful flowers had lost their charm, and their fragrance had become sickening. As she remembered the ranch, there had always been men working stock about the place. She'd take a walk. Anything, anywhere, rather than stay in this whitewashed tomb, with the three silent servants. Even old Rosita, who had been a mother to her when she was a child, spoke now only when spoken to, and in as few words as possible. Ruth passed out through the entrance passage, and walked about the grove. She saw no one except two Mexican boys, who removed their hats and became dumb when she spoke to them. There was no sound of galloping horses and the cries of men driving cattle. A great stillness was over the place. It was a tomb! She was buried alive. At the thought Ruth fled back to the flower-scented patio.

IT WAS on that same evening that the outfit moved back to headquarters. Cliff Lea, Red, and Coley brought in a band of saddle horses. Brannum and Page Cothran rode on, an hour ahead of the outfit, while the other hands had scattered to different tasks that would bring them to the ranch after nightfall.

"What do you think we been doin' the last three days, Coley?" asked Red.

"Earning our forty a month and grub, I guess," growled Coley.

"Hell we have! The whole outfit ain't earned four bits. Notey Beney's gone crazy. How does it look to you, Cliff?"

"Well," drawled Cliff, "it looks to me like the beginning of something else, but nobody can tell what it is. Best thing we can do is go ahead and do what we're told, whether it looks right to us or not."

"Mebbe it is, but I'm about fed up on working for a crazy man. They's plenty of things I won't do for pay. If Coley was like me, we'd ride from here. Don't see why Notey Beney don't put a foreman with the men, and——"

"Like Page," suggested Cliff, with a sardonic grin.

"Hell no! If he was foreman——"

A doe and two fawns jumped out of a thicket, the band of horses scattered, and the three riders separated to get them back in the trail.

Far ahead of the outfit rode Brannum and Page Cothran. The Old Man hadn't spoken a word since they started. He reined his horse back by the side of Page now and said:

"Page, you been with me five year. You're a good worker, and I ain't never caught you at anything crooked." Old Neil Brannum bored to the cowboy's very marrow with his cold gray eyes. Page colored slightly, but said nothing. "I never had a foreman of the whole ranch. Just some wagon bosses and the like, but—I'm getting old, and I got to have one. Think you can handle the Old Floresty?"

"Why, I—I don't know, sir," stammered Page, taken by surprise.

"You'd be willin' to try, I reck'n," and there was a frosty smile on Brannum's hard lips.

"Yes, sir. If you wanted me to."

"I do want you to, and I don't mind telling you it will be to your advantage if you make good on the job."

That was all that was said at the time. Brannum spurred ahead, and Page Cothran followed, respectfully, as he had always done, but his mind was busy, now.

The first thought that flashed to Page's mind was whether or not this new job of foreman would give him authority to hire and fire men. At the same instant, there appeared before his mind's eye the lanky form of Cliff Lea. Cliff had been on the ranch two years. He was far and away the best cowhand in the outfit, but by Page's standards there was something wrong with him. In the two years Cliff had never been away from the ranch, except to go to Palo Alto occasionally. There, he would take a few drinks and buck the Monte game. That was the extent of the man's dissipation. Page had seen Cliff in gunfights, and he was the coolest man in a pinch that he had ever known. At first, Page had thought he was just a say-nothing freak, but as time passed, he knew there was more than that. Of late, Page had tried to quarrel with Cliff, but had been treated as if he were a boy. That enraged him more than anything. Page didn't know it, perhaps, but he was afraid of Cliff. If he had been sober, Page never would have done the thing he had done in the Green Tree that day. Drunk as he was, he had seen that in Cliff's gray eyes that warned him not to try anything of the kind again. If being foreman gave him the authority, he determined that Cliff should go pretty soon. There were many strange things hidden in the big pear thicket. Men who never left it, for reasons of their own. Page was still pondering these things, when they reached the ranch at dusk.

"Give your horse to the boy and come on to the house," growled Brannum. "I want you to eat supper with me."

This seemed to Page evidence that his new job was raising him a bit socially. He had been to the ranch-house but few times in his five years there, and had never eaten a meal there in his life. A little while later they entered the dining-room by one door, just as Ruth entered by another.

"My granddaughter, Miss Brannum, Mr. Cothran," growled Old Neil, and they sat down to the table.

Old Neil Brannum spoke no more words than were necessary. For a few minutes, Page was stupefied, and paid close attention to his knife and fork. He had heard that Brannum had a granddaughter somewhere, but he had never heard it hinted that she was an angel. Ruth had met many young men. Under strict chaperonage, it is true, but she knew how to talk to them. Starving for human conversation, she talked to Page, and he got over his diffidence before the meal was finished.

There was no parlor at the Floresty. It was a strictly utilitarian house. There was a room that Ruth's father had used as a library, but it was nothing but a jumble of dusty books now and was rarely opened. They went to Old Neil's big living-room. Ruth had no notion of going back to her own room. At any rate, the young man would talk to her, and she'd go crazy if she didn't talk to someone.

Old Neil lit his pipe and ignored them. Page's idea of talking to a pretty girl was not sitting in the most somber room in the world, with a death's head for a third party. He couldn't find anything to say. At last, he asked Ruth if she rode horseback.

"Why, I used to ride, but I haven't been on a horse for six years, and——"

"Oh, you ain't forgot!" said Page. "Riding a braunk's like swimming. Once you know how, you can't forget. I'll pick you out a good saddler, if you'll go with me sometime."

"Oh, thank you, Mr. Cothran. That'll be splendid."

"When?"

"Anytime. I wish I was on a horse right now. There's a freedom about riding a good horse that——"

"Reck'n I could get off a while tomorrow morning, to give Miss Brannum a riding lesson?" Page asked Old Neil.

"Humph! You're foreman. Looks like you could do pretty much as you please," growled Brannum. "Riding would be good for Ruth, if she don't get lost in the pear thickets. Better keep an eye on her."

That was the only time Old Neil Brannum spoke and then neither of the young people knew just what he meant. Page knew the old man kept early hours, so he said good-night and went to the bunk-shack. He was walking on air. He was now foreman and the rich old ranchman had put him on a basis of equality. More than that, he had introduced him to Ruth. She was the prettiest woman he had ever seen, and—strangely, at that moment—it came to him that Ruth was Neil Brannum's heir.

After the young people were gone, Old Neil Brannum refilled his pipe and chuckled to himself. It had been so long since he had tried to laugh that his throat rasped and crackled horribly.

"Fell right into the trap," he said to himself. "Knowed they would. Ruth's starved already to be noticed, and Page would be a damn fool if he didn't notice her. Once I get 'em hooked, I'll make a little trip and see a lawyer. Page'll think he's getting the Old Floresty with her. I'll fix it so their grandchildren'll get it. All he'll get will be the proceeds from it, and he'll have to work like hell to get that, same as I've done. Goin' riding! He, he, he! Her crazy for a man, and him crazy for a woman or a ranch, either one, and thinking he's got a chance to get both. They won't delay the game long. Hope not. Want it settled. Won't be here much longer. Don't want some money-spending, Eastern fool wasting what I worked for. She's got one back there, I reck'n, but Page'll make her forget him. Page is my kind of man. Got whiskers on his chest."

Still cackling over the shrewd trap he had set for his granddaughter, Old Neil Brannum went off to bed.

EARLY next morning, Old Neil mounted his horse and rode away from the ranch alone. Whether he did it to see what would happen, or what his purpose was, no one would ever know. He didn't talk. Page made it plain to the men that he was foreman of the ranch. Cliff was looking at him, with a faint smile on his face, at the time. This aggravated Page. He was not going out with the men that day, and he would have put Cliff in charge of them, knowing he was the most capable of the lot, but for that smile. Instead, he appointed a man that he knew couldn't handle the outfit, thinking to humiliate Cliff, and again Cliff smiled in his face.

As the men saddled up, Page roped out two horses, one of which was his own "Sunday" horse and a fine saddler. He put his own saddle on the other and rode off toward the ranch-house. Up to that time, none of the men knew there was a girl on the ranch.

"Jacks up!" grinned Red. "The new foreman aims to ride two braunks."

"He's so heavy, he'll kill 'em both 'fore night," replied Coley.

The man Page had appointed foreman for the day was slow about getting the men off on their respective jobs.

"Guess I'm appointed to ride up to Twin Wells this morning," said Cliff Lea, and without waiting for a reply, mounted and rode away.

The pens were three hundred yards from the ranch-house, and a thick grove cut off the view. Cliff wasn't spying on Page. He just wanted to get away from the crowd and do some thinking that had stacked up on him. Just as he came out in view of the ranch-house, and not more than a hundred and fifty yards from it, he saw something that stopped him dead.

Page assisted a woman to mount that Sunday horse. The animal stood perfectly still until Page had mounted his own horse. But that Sunday horse had never known so light a load on its back, nor so light a hand on its bridle. It bolted, straight toward where Cliff sat his horse, looking at the girl in astonishment. The main point was, he didn't know there was a white woman in that part of the country. That thought flashed into his mind. Then it flashed out, as he saw the horse put its head down and go into a wild spasm of "fence-row" bucking. The woman went off, struck the ground, and lay still, while Page came galloping behind her. Cliff spurred his horse to where she lay, dismounted, and picked her up in his arms.

"Here! What do you mean? Don't do that!" commanded Page.

Cliff merely looked at him as if he had been a loose horse, and strode on to the house, with Ruth in his arms. Old Rosita met him and showed him the way to Ruth's room. He laid her on a bed, and removing his gauntlet gloves, took the basin of cold water Rosita brought, and wetting a towel, bathed the girl's face. Then he calmly examined a small cut in her temple, from which blood flowed. Deciding it wasn't serious, he went on bathing it until she opened her eyes.

"Oh, I— I'm all right now," said Ruth, sitting up on the side of the bed. "Thank you very much for—for your kindness."

"You're entirely welcome, ma'am," replied Cliff, "but you'd better stay off that horse." He turned to leave the room, and saw Page Cothran standing uneasily just inside the door. Their eyes met, neither of them spoke, but the gage of battle had been thrown. Cliff mounted his horse and rode on to the Twin Wells, to see if the windmills were working. Page, boiling with rage, yet with nothing definite to complain of, went on to catch the runaway horse and unsaddle it, since Ruth said she wouldn't be able to ride now.

So began war, and the first blood was Ruth Brannum's. True it was from a tiny cut that Rosita stopped with a bit of plaster, but it was blood, and the war was on.

Old Neil Brannum knew nothing about all this. He had been in plenty of wars. He had killed men. At least, three lay in unmarked graves, a little way from the ranch-house, who had crossed Old Neil and thought they could beat him to the draw. Then, too, there were several others, scattered about the big pear thicket. Two of them owned small holdings near good water-holes. Brannum afterwards came into possession of their lands. People said things—but not to Neil Brannum. Anyway, that was a long time ago. Still, Brannum knew what a fight was. He knew what a range war was, but he had no idea of what the war he had started, right in his own house, with a beautiful girl as the prize, was going to be like.

When Ruth got over her jolting up and got her breath back, she said:

"Rosita, who was that tall man with such soft, cool fingers, who brought me to the house in his arms, and bathed my face so gently?"

"That was Señor Cliff Lea," replied Rosita, with misgivings.

"But who is he?"

"Un vaquero. Just a cowboy, señorita."

"Just a cowboy," murmured Ruth, and closed her eyes, in order to think more clearly, perhaps, and try to understand how just a rough cowboy could do what that man had done, and do it so deftly and gently.

Out at the Twin Wells, all alone, Cliff Lea was cursing himself for a fool. He had been at the Floresty two years. He was a man who saw things and didn't talk about them. He was convinced that since Page was made foreman, there was danger of trouble with him, and it was time to quit the Floresty and seek other fields. But now . . . Curse himself for a fool as he would, that look that passed between him and Page Cothran, as he left Ruth's room, would hold him right there, until it came to a showdown. No man could say he dodged a challenge, and that was what it amounted to. Cliff didn't know who the girl was, but he had heard of Old Neil's granddaughter. Brannum had been "back in the state," and he could put two and two together as well as anyone. There was nothing about being the old ranchman's granddaughter to make the girl happy, and Cliff thought he could see rough sledding ahead for her. In fact, he thought it had already begun.

"I wonder what that crazy old devil thinks he's trying to do," grated Cliff, as he spurred his horse into the trail and started back toward the ranch.

CHAPTER III

"YOU CAN KILL HIM, CAN'T YOU?"

IT WAS that same evening, at late dusk, that Page went to the ranch-house, ostensibly to ask after Ruth, but there was another matter in his mind that had troubled him all day. Cliff Lea had come in that evening, more saturnine, if possible, and even less talkative than usual. As foreman, Page had asked him where he had been.

"I rode to the Twin Wells, first," Cliff had replied, "and afterward I rode the range."

"Did you have orders to go to the Twin Wells?"

"No."

"Hereafter, do what you're told to do, and——"

"I always do that," Cliff had replied, "and when there's nobody to tell me what to do, I do what I think ought to be done."

Page wanted to say more, but he couldn't trust himself. There was something in Cliff's tone and his very expression that set Page raging, but to save his life he couldn't put his finger on anything definite. He was still thinking of this when he went to the ranch-house, and Old Rosita, assuring him that her young mistress was quite recovered from her fall of the morning, showed him into the grim old living-room. Old Neil Brannum was there smoking his pipe.

"Come in, Page, and take a seat," he growled. "I'll send for Ruth after a bit. Glad you come. I want to talk to you. Did you have any other business, except to see Ruth?"

"Why, yes, sir. I—I wanted——"

"Out with it. Don't stammer like a schoolboy."

"Why, it's about Cliff Lea."

"What about him?"

"I think we ought to let him go."

"Let him go? Hell's blazes! He's the best cowhand on the ranch, and——"

"I know that, but there's something wrong with him. He acts like——"

"Yes, I've noticed he did," interrupted Brannum, with a grim twist of his lips. "Not many such men as Lea in the pear thickets. They wouldn't be here if they hadn't come from somewhere else, and—had a pretty good reason for coming. If you fired all the men off this ranch right now that was wanted somewhere else, you'd be pretty short-handed."

"I know, but I can't handle Cliff."

"Can't handle him? What do you mean? I've run this ranch forty years, and I've never fired a man because I couldn't work him. Tell him what you want done, and if he won't take orders, he'll quit of his own accord."

"But Cliff won't quit."

"Oh, he won't. Then if he gets troublesome, you can kill him, can't you? Running a ranch in the pear country is no parlor game. It's a man's job, and I expect you to run it."

"All right, sir," but there was little assurance in Page's tone. His idea of killing Cliff Lea in any sort of fair fight, was that it was a game of chance, with the odds all on one side.

Old Neil dismissed the matter as of no consequence, failing to notice Page's uncertain tone. He had a matter in his own mind. It had been there some time.

"We tallied five hundred young she cattle short, last year," he said. "I didn't pay much attention to it, for them many cattle could easy enough be left in the thickets at the roundup, on a big range like ours. But this year, it's worse. We're a *thousand* short. That's too many."

"Where do you think they went?" asked Page, for want of something else to say.

"I'm not thinking. It's a case where just thinking won't do any good. You have to *know* and then do something."

"May'be we'd better ask Cliff about it," and a demon was stirring in Page's mind. If he could make Old Notey Beney even think Cliff had something to do with the disappearance of N B cattle, the rest would be easy.

"Ask hell! You don't think he'd be fool enough to tell you he was a rustler, do you? He may be doing it, but if he is he could prove a clean alibi by anybody on the ranch. Whoever it is, he's got to be caught red-handed in the act, and shot or hung. It's your job to catch him, and I wonder if you know why."

"I— I don't know whether I do or not."

"Then, I'll tell you. I aim for you to marry Ruth. She inherits the ranch. If you do marry her, you'll want all the cattle you can get, with her. Personally, I don't care a damn whether the cattle increase or not. I'm about through. Of course, if you don't want Ruth, and the Old Floresty and what's on it, why then I don't reck'n it would be very hard to find a man that would take a deal like that. Possibly Cliff Lea could be persuaded, and then if you're right about him, the rustling would stop itself."

Old Neil Brannum had unerringly picked the raw spot, and was nagging it for a purpose. He didn't think Page would ever be able to handle the outfit until he showed he was game. He had seen Page in a few little gun quarrels, but it would take a showdown with some cold proposition like Cliff Lea to give him confidence in himself and to win the fear and respect of the other men.

"Why— why— Mr. Brannum," said Page, squirming in his chair, "it's gratifying to know that I start in with your approval, but Miss Brannum may have a good deal to say——"

"All she'll have to say will be 'yes' to you, and 'I will' to the preacher. I'll attend to that part of it. Want to see her now?"

"I— I'd like to, but she got a pretty hard fall from a horse this morning, and——"

"Oh, she did? Hurt pretty bad by it, was she?"

"No, sir. Just shaken up a bit, but I reckon that——"

"All right. You can see her tomorrow, but you'd better see her. Sooner it's over, the more you can put your mind on them lost cattle, and—Cliff Lea."

Page took his leave, with a whole nest of things to ponder over. There was enough sense of decency in his make-up to cause repugnance to Old Brannum's idea of a courtship. On the other hand, there was too much avarice in his soul to overlook such an opportunity. With the sanction of Ruth's grandfather, the battle was half won. Another of the fledglings in his nest was the manner in which Old Neil had suggested getting rid of Cliff. Page had no idea of meeting the lanky puncher in a fair fight, but then, nobody thought of giving a rustler a fair chance, and it would be easy enough to handle the matter. So, if one could be literally torn with emotions, Page would have been in shreds before he reached the bunkhouse that night.

TO DO Old Neil Brannum justice, he had no idea that he was going about the matter in a brutal way. He was merely exercising his will with what he felt belonged to him, as he had always done. He had never known anything about sentiment in his early life. It had been hard, grim reality. The pear country was a poor place for sentiment to thrive, so he had none. He had merely cut a young man from his bunch of cowpunchers for his granddaughter, very much as he would have cut a young bull or stallion from his herds of cattle and horses. Brutal, yes, from some viewpoints, yet there was, when all is said, a sort of higher eugenics in his idea. He felt that he had selected a real man. He didn't know where Page went, nor what he did, when he took occasional trips away from the ranch. That was Page's business. A man that was worth a whoop was likely to do a good many things that he wouldn't want published. Most young men did, especially when they had money in their pockets, and he had purposely given Page a chance to have money.

After smoking a few minutes, to catalogue his thoughts and get his line of talk arranged, Old Neil went to the door and called Rosita. Presently, she slipped into the room like an old, much wrinkled, and very brown ghost, with exceedingly bright, youthful eyes.

"Is your mistress abed?" asked Brannum.

"No, señor."

"Tell her to come here."

"*Si,* señor," and Rosita dissolved like the ghost she was.

A few minutes later, Ruth entered the room, and the old martinet motioned her to a chair.

"Got a fall, didn't you?" he said.

"Yes, sir, but I wasn't hurt much, I'll——"

"Forgot how to ride, after all."

"Why— I thought the horse would be gentle."

"Humph! No gentle horses on the ranch. How do you like Page Cothran?"

"He seems to be respectful, and nice. His language is rather coarse, and——"

"Oh, it is! I reck'n you learned a lot of fool stuff like that at school. The pear country's a good place to forget it. Better get used to Page's coarse language as soon as you can, and learn to understand him."

"Why, I don't see——"

"I do. You're going to marry him."

"Marry him! When?"

"As soon as he asks you, and I got an idea that that won't be very long."

A hundred questions sprang to Ruth's lips, but she couldn't ask a one of them. She sat in a sort of stunned silence for a full minute, and then Old Neil Brannum said:

"That's all. Thought I better tell you, so you wouldn't be surprised when Page asked you, and would know what to say. Wanted you to know that the match suits me. Go to bed."

Ruth got up and left the room, without even saying good-night, so great had been the shock. Brannum didn't even look at her. She went back to her room and found Rosita there.

"Rosita," said Ruth, after a long silence, "when I was a little child you loved me and was a mother to me, but now——"

"Oh, *querida mia!* I still love you." And the old woman looked toward the door with terror in her eyes. "I can never cease to love the baby that I nursed, after the angel mother had gone."

"Then why, since I came back, have you been so cold and unfriendly? You do not speak to me, except when you are spoken to."

"It is late and you should be in bed, *querida mia,*" evaded the girl's old nurse.

"No, it is not very late. If it were, I'm not sleepy. I don't think I'll sleep tonight. I want to know a good many things. Tell me, first, why you won't talk to me like you used to do."

Old Neil Brannum knew men, and could figure what they would do under given circumstances, but he couldn't conceive the feeling of a woman who had nursed a helpless baby, saw it develop into a lovely thing like Ruth Brannum, and then was appealed to by it. Such things were beyond the old ranchman's reckoning. The little, pleading note in Ruth's voice broke the lock that Brannum had put on the old woman's lips, and fanned the embers that had slumbered in her heart all these years into a flame of love and loyalty to her mistress that no fear could ever quench again.

"El maestro!" she whispered, glancing

toward the door. "He is so strange. He bade me speak little to you. I do not understand, but he said it would be best for you, and—and terrible for me if I did not obey."

Ruth pondered this for a moment. She didn't want to get her faithful old nurse into trouble. She could remember the result of her grandfather's wrath on some of his servants. Old Andreas, the yard man, still limped as a result of a slight disobedience. At last she said:

"I would not get you into trouble, Rosita, but there are things that I must know, or I shall go mad. We'll whisper. If grandfather comes, I'll tell him I'm nervous after my fall today, and bade you stay in my room tonight."

"I'd die for you!" whispered Rosita, "but what will happen to you, if——"

"It is what is about to happen to me that I want to talk about. Would you like to see me given in marriage to a man that I have seen but twice, and know nothing at all about? A man that I do not love."

"Ah, *no quiera Dios!* Surely God would not let a thing like that happen to a lovely girl like you."

There was a wan smile on Ruth's twisted lips. Rosita's faith was great. For herself, she doubted that God's mercy could follow the intricate trails of the pear country. At least, she feared that it would arrive too late to save her. Somewhere, she had heard or read, "God helps those who help themselves."

"What do you know about Page Cothran?" she asked suddenly.

"Why, he is the master's friend and companion. For a long time he has been *vecero* to *el capitan*, and now they say he is *generalissimo* of the whole ranch. He is the handsomest man on the ranch, as you can see for yourself. Could you not love Señor Page?"

"I— I might come to love him, in time, but— I refuse——"

"Ah, *querida!* Refuse is a frail word to pit against the will of Señor Brannum. Did he command you to marry Page Cothran?"

"Yes." And Ruth repeated what Brannum had said to her.

"Then the die is cast. You will marry him, but it is cruel that he didn't give you time to love before marriage. It is best. It is all—to a woman. And yet, with great riches——"

"I will not marry a man I do not love!" declared Ruth, and there was a hint of Old Neil Brannum's obstinacy in her tones. "What do you know about Cliff Lea?"

"But, my dear," protested Rosita, "he is only a cowhand, a common vaquero, and——"

"Tell me what you know about him."

"No one knows much about Señor Lea. He is a cold man. A strange man, and he talks not about himself. He is wonderful with the reata, he is wonderful with the cattle and the horses. He talks little, but men fear him. They say he is quick and wonderful with his gun, but he rarely shoots. His cold word or two, and the glance of his eyes, is enough for most men."

"Would he not be a good friend?"

"Such men are good friends only to men. They do not like women. They have what you call a cold heart. I heard him speak gruffly to you this morning about the horse, and——"

"Yes, he spoke gruffly, but he bathed my face as gently as any woman could have done it. Can you talk to him?"

"No! I never spoke to him in my life. He would not listen to me, or even notice me."

"Has he friends among the men?"

"Two that I know of. They are called Red and Coley. But, *querida,* you must not——"

"I must and will. You shall get a note to Cliff Lea for me."

"But I cannot speak to him, I tell you."

"Give it to one of his two friends, and tell him to deliver it. That will be as well."

"But the master! He will kill me if he learns of it. No, no, no! It can't be done."

"Which do you love most, the master or me?"

"Ah, *querida mia!* You know that I love no one on earth as I love you. It has broken my heart that I couldn't talk to you, as I used to do."

"Then you will show your love for me."

IT WAS the following morning. The men rode away to the day's work. Cliff Lea was given the partners to help him, with instructions to round up the cattle that ranged about the Twin Wells and count the young she cattle. Old Neil Brannum and Page took the other men, and went to another part of the range. Brannum wanted to talk to his new foreman, and he didn't want the wise Cliff Lea, and his two satellites, to catch a word that he said. In spite of his statement that he cared nothing about the cattle, he was very much interested to know where they were going. He wanted Page to catch the rustlers red-handed, and see how he would handle the matter. If Cliff Lea was the head of the rustlers, Red and Coley were in with him, for they were his shadows. By letting those three work to themselves, and giving them ample opportunity, they would be easily caught.

Never was there a more peaceful expression on the face of the grim old pear country. That a storm was about to break, there was not the slightest indication, but storms rise quickly in the pear country, sometimes, and the most unusual things start them.

Cliff and the partners were just out of sight of the ranch, when Red spurred his horse to Cliff's side, and said:

"Wait a minute, Cliff. You're always ketchin' bugs and butterflies and lookin' at 'em. Here's a new kind for you."

Red had done that same thing a hundred times, so Cliff held out his hand.

"Don't let it get away," grinned Red, and placing his closed fist over Cliff's palm he opened his hand, then spurred away to catch up with Coley, who had ridden on ahead.

Cliff felt a folded piece of paper in his hand, and opening it he read:

I didn't thank you as I'd like to, for your kindness. Can't you bring a gentle horse, and take me for a ride this morning?
Ruth Brannum.

Cliff's gray eyes smouldered as he read that little note. This girl wanted to talk to him for some reason. What was it? He had no idea, but she should have the chance. He galloped on and caught up with the partners:

"You boys ride on to Twin Wells and go to work. I have to go back to the ranch. I'll get back as soon as I can," and turning about, Cliff rode thoughtfully back through the pear thicket.

Half an hour later, he and Ruth rode away from the ranch-house together. Old Rosita was wringing her hands in the patio. There was no one about the place but herself, Teresa, Andreas, and the two Mexican boys. All these she could bind to silence, had already bound, for they feared her as if she were the fiend incarnate because she was, next to the master, the head of the house. The thing she feared was that Old Neil Brannum might return any moment. So, Rosita possessed her tortured soul in what peace she could, for what seemed to her an eternity. It was really less than an hour.

Meantime, Ruth Brannum and Cliff Lea rode half a mile through the tortuous ways of the pear thicket, and stopped in a little pocket. Of all the places on earth to hide, none ever equaled the pear country. Rarely could one see quarter of a mile distant, and usually not a hundred feet. Brannum had said that five hundred cattle might easily be missed in rounding up that range. One familiar with the country, its crooked trails and water-holes, could stay there indefinitely, and never be seen.

"You must be wondering why I sought this chance to talk to you, Mr. Lea, and I'm anxious to tell you. I don't want you to misunderstand, and I do want you to be my friend. I have not one in this terrible, choking, pear country, except poor old Rosita, and she is beside herself with fear."

"Why, particularly, do you need a friend just now?" asked Cliff.

"To protect me."

"From what?"

"The brutal will of my grandfather, and the equally brutal advances of—another man." And then she told him frankly what Old Neil Brannum's plans were for her.

Cliff's face flushed darkly, and there was an odd light in his eyes. Ruth noticed it, and knew it was not the light of desire, that she had seen in Cothran's eyes, nor yet the light of anger, altogether. It was undefinable something that she had never seen in any man's eyes before.

"Miss Brannum," said Cliff, slowly, "any man should feel honored to be your friend, at any time. He wouldn't be worthy the name of man, if he refused to serve you in a situation like that. Still, I don't see anything that I can do."

Ruth stared at him. His language was not that of a common cowhand, and there was that note of deference to a lady, that she could understand.

"But, please, Mr. Lea, something must be done. I can't——"

"What in the world is such a woman as

you doing in this godforsaken pear thicket, anyway?" asked Cliff, impatiently. "It is bad enough any time, but there is danger in every bend of the trails now."

"It is all the home I have, and—I didn't know it had changed so much, or I'd have died before I would have come here. If nothing else can be done, I'll run away."

"No!" and there was alarm in Cliff's voice. "Don't ever try that. You'd be hopelessly lost before you went a mile. It's a hundred miles to any sort of civilized community, and——"

"But, I'd rather die than to do what grandfather intends for me to do. I can die but once, and he would sentence me to a living death. I can't——"

"I can understand how you feel. I'm willing to befriend you in any way that I can. Methods are rough and brutal in the pear country. A man gets in the way and is put out, but to kill Cothran, which would be easy enough, would only delay your fate. Your grandfather would find another, and perhaps worse——"

"No, no, no! I don't want anyone killed on account of me. I only want to be saved from worse than death, myself."

"I understand, but this is a primitive country. There is quite likely to be more than one man killed on account of your coming here. More than that, I'm quite likely to be one of them, if it becomes known that you appealed to me. I'm——"

"You mean that you, a man, are afraid to give your friendly aid to a girl who——"

"A moment please," and Cliff's lips twisted into a cold, hard smile. "No one has ever accused me of being afraid of anything. I was just going to say—I'm sure that if I am to befriend you long, it must not be known that we have talked together. The shorter time you stay away from the house, the less likely it is to be known. I'll have to think it over, before I know what I can do. Meantime, I suppose a message can pass between us in the same way that yours came to me, if you think it safe."

"There are only two people," said Ruth. "Rosita and your friend. I can vouch for Rosita."

"Then it is safe enough. You must go back, now. Every moment adds to your danger."

A few minutes later Cliff sat on his horse, watching her ride away toward the ranch-house. It was less than half a mile, and he had told her to let the horse have its head and it would take her home. The animal was his own private mount, and so far as he knew was the only horse on the ranch that a woman could ride with any degree of safety.

When Ruth was out of sight around a bend in the trail, Cliff Lea rode on toward Twin Wells. There was an odd smile on his lips, and it was reflected in his level gray eyes. He was thinking that of all men on earth, he was the last that anyone would expect to take up the duties of knighthood. Here was a strange man, in a strange situation. Oh, well. His life wasn't worth very much, he thought. It would be worth far less, or rather it would last a much shorter time, if Old Neil Brannum and Page Cothran learned what had happened that morning. Pondering these things, Cliff rode on to the wells, found the partners, and set about carrying out his orders for the day.

CHAPTER IV

CLIFF LEA KNOWS HIS PEARS

THE little squad of riders that stayed regularly at the ranch occupied about the same position toward the rest of the outfit that a headquarters company would bear toward a regiment. They worked the immediate home range, but the principal part of the work on the ranch was done by Mexican vaqueros. These were scattered over the range at different ranch cabins, where there were pens for stock, and a sort of shelter for the men. Each of these small outfits had a boss who was a white man. A sort of petty subforeman. The bosses were a rough lot, quick with their guns, and dangerous men to cross. They had to be, or they couldn't hold their jobs. Each of them had two or three old vaqueros, who were their slaves, and could be relied upon to the last drop of their blood. The rest were drifting Mexican riders, good enough cowhands, but including every kind of criminal known to the border. Many of them could be hired for a few dollars to commit the foulest sort of murder.

One of these petty foremen, whose gun wouldn't have held the notches to which it was entitled, was Bud Rolfe. The ranch cabin where he held sway was called Loma Rojo, or Red Ridge. It was a slight elevation of red soil, cut by erosion where the draws broke toward the Rio Grande, at the extreme southwest of Brannum's holdings, and less than ten miles from the Mexican border. Rolfe was said to have a dash of Spanish or Indian blood, and a very light regard for any human life except his own.

As *vecero,* Page Cothran's duty had been to ride from headquarters to these cabins, carrying instructions to the bosses. In that way he had become acquainted with all these petty foremen, and with many of their men. Page was twenty-eight, thoroughly familiar with the affairs of the ranch, a good cowman, and fully competent for his new position of foreman. Old Neil Brannum had trained him particularly for the job, and thought he knew him.

That same morning, as Cliff and the partners rode for Twin Wells, Brannum and Page visited three of these outlying ranches. Brannum took pains to tell the bosses that Page was foreman of the whole ranch, now, and he sent men to tell other bosses, so they would all have notice to take orders from Page. That was Brannum's way. *Nota Bene.* He had put them on notice. Now, if Page had to kill one or two of them before they understood the new regime, that was their lookout. He had done the like himself a few times. At the first of the three places they visited, Page called practically all the men by name, and spent some time talking to first one and then another of them. It was drawing on toward night when Brannum and the new foreman reached the ranch.

"Better come up to the house tonight," said Brannum, as they parted at the corral, after unsaddling. "You got things in hand, now. Take a little time and get your family business settled." The old rascal was not pushing the matter so much because he was in any hurry as to the wedding of the young people, but because he had sensed opposition to his plans, in Ruth's manner the night before, and he was anxious to show his power.

Page was willing enough. He had had time to do a good deal of thinking. Not many young men were given opportunity such as his. Aside from the ranch and stock, which would belong to Ruth in a few more years, the girl herself was a prize. Ruth Brannum, just turned eighteen, with her blue eyes and golden hair, was not only a beauty that set the dark-skinned Cothran wild with desire, which was, so far, his only knowledge of love, but she was steady and sensible, and Page knew she would make a proper wife for a rich ranchman. So, he went to the bunkshack, shaved, and made himself presentable, intending to begin pressing his conquest that very night.

THE Twin Wells were about five miles northwest from the headquarters ranch, but when Cliff and the partners started home that evening, Cliff led the way due east from the wells, and approached the ranch finally from the northeast. They reached the ranch a few minutes after Brannum and Page got in. The partners had wondered why Cliff led them that roundabout way, but had asked no questions. They were soon to get an idea, and say nothing about it, either. The three had just reached the bunkhouse, and were washing up for supper, when two men came galloping up and dismounted:

"Where's your foreman?" asked one of the strangers.

"Here I am," called Page, who had come to the door. "What can I do for you?"

"Give us some men to help bring in our partner, and——"

"Your partner? What's the matter with him?"

"Nothing much. He's just tar'ble dead. The three of us was riding the trail, coming in from them Twin Wells, and aiming to make here by night. Somebody opens from a pear thicket and picks him off just like he was ripe. 'Cause he was in front, and tallest, maybe. We shells the thicket, and then rides for help. It ain't more'n a mile from here."

A quick look passed between Red and Coley. In another minute they, with Cliff and two others, were saddling their horses to go back with the strangers. The two men said they were from a ranch a hundred miles up the country and were on their way to the lower Nueces to get a band of saddle horses. The dead man was found in the trail, with a bullet through his head.

"Where's that thicket you shelled?" asked Cliff.

"Right there," and one of the men

pointed to a dense pear and catclaw thicket.

Cliff rode around the thicket, and peered into it. It was dusk, but presently he said, "You did a pretty good job of shelling that thicket." There lay a dead man.

A few minutes later they were riding toward the house, with the two bodies lashed on horses.

"Cliff shore knows his pear thickets," whispered Red to Coley, as they dropped a little behind the others. "If we had come this way, at least one of us would be taking music lessons on a harp now."

Coley made no comment. Arrived at the ranch the two dead men were laid out in a shack a little way from the bunkhouse. One of the strangers held a lantern to the face of the man who had done the killing, and said: "Any of you fellows know him?"

No one answered, and finally Page Cothran said: "'Stranger to this outfit."

"Well, I reck'n it don't make no difference, now, who he is. He's had his trial. You fellows can bury the varmint, if you want to. We won't bury him."

Nothing more could be done that night, so the door of the cabin was closed, and the men went on to the cookshack and had supper. Page went with them, and showed the strangers the usual cow-camp courtesies, but there was little talking during the meal. There was considerable thinking being done, though. Some of it was being done by Page Cothran and a good deal of it by Cliff Lea.

After supper the men returned to the bunkhouse. Page excused himself and went up to the old house in the grove. Old Man Brannum hadn't been told of the killings. No use to bother him with a little thing like that. A few minutes after Page left, Cliff got up, looked at each of the partners, and walked out. Red and Coley followed him. When they reached the big corral, which was empty, they squatted down in the middle of it.

"Do you know that killer, Red?" asked Cliff.

"Shore I do. Coley knows him, too."

"Who is he?"

"Manuel Rubio. Works over to the Resaca Dorado outfit. Been there about a year, and would kill his grandmother for four bits—half cash."

"Why do you suppose he killed that stranger?"

"By mistake, I reck'n, don't you?"

"I'm afraid I'm going to have to quit the old Notey Beney," said Cliff, by way of reply. "This pear country is getting too unhealthy."

"Not for a gent that knows his pears like you do," growled Coley, speaking now for the first time.

"I was pretty sure that was Manuel," Cliff went on, "but I wanted to be positive. They look pretty much alike when they're dead. Better try to forget you knew him, as soon as you can."

They smoked in silence a few minutes and then Cliff said:

"Boys, you know as well as I do that Rubio thought he was killing me. Somebody wants me gone from the Floresty, suddenly and for good. A man can get lost in this pear thicket, and nobody would ever know what became of him. It's getting too unhealthy for me."

"Maybe you could take something for it," grinned Red, and his white teeth showed in the gloom.

"I mean to. I'm going to take my leave in the morning. We drew our pay a week ago. I'll give Old Notey Beney what's coming to me. I mean to just ride off, and not come back. I don't think I'd ever get off the range, if it was known that I was leaving."

"We'll go with you," said Red, "won't we, Coley?"

"Suits me," muttered Coley. "I ain't sure Rubio wouldn't have got you and me if he could."

"That's mighty fine of you boys," said Cliff, "but I don't want your friendship for me to cause you to lose your jobs, and probably get you into trouble."

"Rather get into trouble account of friendship for you than to wear diamonds and eat ham and aigs three times a day, with an outfit like this has got to be, and —it's apt to get worse from here on."

The compact was made in silence. The cold, seemingly heartless Cliff Lea wanted these two men. He knew they worshipped him for his nerve, his speed with the lariat, and above all, for his uncanny speed and accuracy with the gun that he rarely used. He knew they'd follow him blindly. What his purpose was, none might know. Many a band of desperate men had grown from a poorer nucleus, right there in the pear country.

"All right," said Cliff, after a long silence. "We'll leave in the morning. I don't know yet where we'll go. We'll have to decide that later. The main thing is to get away from here alive. I have enough money to keep us up for a while and I'll split anything that comes our way, with you."

"That's fair," said Red.

"Good. Now there's just one more thing. Do you know where you got that butterfly you gave me this morning?"

"Shore!"

"Could you go back to the place?"

"Shore could. In the dark, and blindfolded."

"All right. I'll want you to do that, after a bit."

They went back to the bunkhouse, and sat around talking with the other men. No one could have suspected what they had in mind. Cliff would gladly have ridden that night, but he thought the bunkhouse was a safer place. Manuel Rubio had not been the only man in the pear country who would kill his grandmother for four bits—half cash and the balance when he could get it.

MEANTIME, Page Cothran had gone on to the ranch-house to begin his swift siege and capture of Ruth Brannum. He walked boldly through the wide entrance, and on through the flower-scented patio. Already, he was feeling a sense of proprietorship about the place. When he was married to Ruth, of course he'd live there instead of living at the dirty old bunkhouse with the men. No one was stirring about the place. Not even the servants. Page went on and knocked at the door of the big living-room.

"Come in!" called Brannum. "Oh, it's you. Time you got on the job and begin to show signs you're alive."

"I know, but—I—I can't very well talk to Ruth here in the room with you. A girl don't like that sort of thing."

"Oh, she don't! Well, talk to her in her own room."

"I don't think she'd—she'd like that, either."

"Huh! If you start out worrying about what she'd like, you ain't apt to get very far. There's the whole patio out there, with plenty seats in it. I'll call her in here, and you can take her out there and talk your head off. I don't see that there is much talk needed."

Brannum went to the door and called in a voice that rasped like a file on the edge of glass. A door opened somewhere and Old Rosita materialized a moment later.

"Tell Ruth to come in here," commanded Brannum.

Rosita, who had got a glimpse of Page Cothran, stole back through the shrubbery, instead of following the walk that led around the wall inside the court. She was gone a long time. Page grew nervous, and the old man cursed under his breath. Finally, Rosita came back and said her mistress was ill in bed, with a severe headache, and a violent rigor. Unsuspecting that he was merely matching wits with two women, Brannum dismissed her.

When she was gone, he turned to Page. "Take tomorrow to settle this business. She'll ride a horse, and give you a chance to talk. If you can't find one that's gentle enough, dope one and make it gentle."

Page promised to do his best, and went back through the silent patio, and on to the bunkhouse.

"Now what the hell's the matter with that fellow," mused Old Neil Brannum, when Page was gone. "He's finniky as a boy. He's a grown man, and I happen to know he takes on the wildest girls in the dance halls, yet he's as afraid of a timid schoolgirl as if she were a panther. Damn if I can understand him. Acts like he had something else on his mind all the time. Wonder if he's got another wife somewhere and— If he has, I'll kill him, damn him! He's got a right to have a wife if he wants one, but he ain't got no right to go this far in this thing, without telling me about her."

IN SPITE of Ruth's critical condition, she was sitting in a chair, fully clad, when Rosita slipped into her room an hour after Page Cothran left the house.

"Ah, *querida mia,*" she panted. "This intrigue will be the death of me. I could not deliver the note you gave me, so here it is."

She handed Ruth a note which she had written an hour earlier, and which read:

I am determined to escape from this prison and what threatens me, if I die in *the attempt. Won't you let me have the horse I rode this morning, and one other that is gentle. I'll be forever grateful if you'll aid me that much in my terror.*

Ruth glanced at it, saw that it was indeed her own note, and sank back helplessly in her chair. She was cudgeling her brain for some other means of communicating with the cold-blooded puncher, when Rosita, having recovered her breath and her wits, said:

"While I was waiting for the red one to come, after I had sent for him, a strange Mexican man that I had never seen stood almost touching me before I knew it. I all but screamed with the fright, but in good Spanish he cautioned me, and said: 'For your mistress,' then thrusting this into my hand, he disappeared as if the earth had swallowed him," and she handed Ruth a small, closely folded paper.

Ruth unfolded it and read:

My life is in danger and I am leaving. Any message for me can be delivered to the same Spaniard, at the same place this was delivered to you, and at the same hour of the evening.

Thinking that Cliff Lea who, cold as he was, seemed to be her only chance for a friend, was already gone from the ranch, Ruth gave up in despair. She had bravely determined to get horses from the cowboy, which she felt sure was as far as he would go in the matter of helping her. With these, she had meant to take Rosita, and try to win her way out of the big thicket. Now, even that hope was gone. So broken-spirited was she that she didn't stop to wonder how messages could reach a man who had gone out of the country, in time to help her in an emergency.

At last she said: "Rosita, you say this man you call Red is Cliff Lea's friend? Seek him the first thing in the morning and arrange some way for me to talk to him. I'll get horses from him. I won't——"

"But, *querida!* If the master should learn that you——"

"The master can do nothing worse than he is planning to do. Go the first thing in the morning."

Unconsciously, Ruth was developing a bit of the iron of the pear country, and a considerable trace of Old Neil Brannum's stubborn fighting spirit. Had she been a boy, there would have yet been considerable hope of a house of Brannum in America.

"CLIFF, you take Red and Coley with you, and ride at once for Loma Rojo. Tell Bud Rolfe that I am now foreman of the whole ranch. Tell him to go right ahead, the same as he has always done, except that I want him to round up his range and count the young she cattle. Tell him, also, that you three are to stay and help him with the work, as long as he wants you to stay."

Thus ordered Page Cothran, foreman of the Old Floresty, next morning, soon after daylight. Cliff took the order without the quiver of an eyelash. Immediately afterward, the three mounted and took the trail that led to Palo Alto. That was the route to Loma Rojo, until a left-hand trail was reached ten miles from the ranch. So, when Rosita sought Red, at sunrise, she learned that he, too, had gone somewhere.

Five miles from the grim old Floresty ranch-house, there was an immense thicket to the right or north of the Palo Alto trail, which bent far to the south in order to get around it. That thicket was an impenetrable green wall, mounted with forbidding spines. The only relief in the green monotony was an occasional white spot, where a colony of cochinilla had settled on the broad pear leaves. A broad, flat-bottomed draw came out of the thicket about midway, but it was so thickly grown up with pear and chaparral that no one could follow it.

Just before reaching the big thicket, Cliff left the trail and turned due north, Red and Coley following. There had been no talking since they left the ranch, but the partners knew Cliff Lea was not going to take them to Loma Rojo. They had ridden half a mile, and had come out in a little glade where some cattle were grazing, and about due east from the middle of the great thicket. There was a fat young calf with the cattle. Cliff uncoiled his reata. A moment later the calf was on the ground. Cliff dismounted, tied its feet, and passed it up to Red, who laid it across his saddle. Mounting again, Cliff led the way into what seemed to be a deep pocket in the edge of the thicket, saying: "Better keep pretty close to me." At the same time he made a sharp turn and disappeared.

After going a short distance, the partners began seeing marks slashed with a knife, on the broad leaves of the pear. They were the letter L or letter R, indicating left and right turns in the winding trail. They followed every point of the compass in going half a mile, and finally came out in an open mesquite glade of twenty acres or more, in the very heart of the thicket. On the bank of a deep arroyo stood a cabin of palisades with a sound roof. In the arroyo was a shallow well with plenty of good water.

"How come this cabin in here?" asked Red, when they drew up and stopped near it.

"I don't know," replied Cliff. "I found it about a year ago. Got a glimpse of it from a windmill tower at the Twin Wells, and hunted until I found it. Whoever built it knew how to hide."

"I'll say he did. The devil couldn't find this place with a good lantern," grinned Red.

"Butcher the calf," directed Cliff. "Cut the meat into strips and hang it in the trees to dry. Then wait here until I come back. You couldn't find your way out of here in a week, if you tried." Crossing the arroyo he disappeared into the thicket on the west side.

"Huh! Two ways out of here, anyway," grunted Red. "Wonder how that cabin got here, and how long it aims to be our happy home. Been built a long time, but it's in pretty good shape. Camp kit and bunks in there, and everything. Even a fireplace. Looks kinder seldom to me. Funny about Cliff. We don't know anything about him. Wonder what his idea is. Wonder where he's gone to now."

"Don't know where he's gone," said Coley. "Don't know what his idea is, but it's a cinch it's a good one. I ain't worrying none a-tall. Cliff knows his pears." And he went on skinning the calf, and preparing to carry out Cliff's orders, which were law enough for him.

"Yep. He shore do know his pears, and his pear country. I don't know what he aims to lead us into, but I aim to foller him."

That ended all spoken speculation on the part of the partners. It was late in the afternoon when Cliff came riding across the arroyo. He had been openly to Palo Alto, and had brought back a heavy pack of supplies for the camp, indicating that he might intend to stay there some time. Each of them had his own blanket-roll, and they were now prepared to be quite comfortable.

"Less'n five miles from Old Floresty and the devil couldn't find us with his pet dog in a year," muttered Red, as he lugged the supplies into the cabin.

Cliff said nothing. They made a little fire, cooked and ate a hearty meal, and then sat around smoking. The sun was low in the west by this time, and the shadows of the tall pear made grotesque markings on the glade. Just after sunset, Cliff roused from a period of silence and deep thought.

"Guess we better saddle and ride, fellows," he said.

CHAPTER V

OLD NEIL BRANNUM IS BEREAVED

AFTER Ruth's instruction of the night before, Rosita set out early next morning to carry them out. She had been frightened half out of her wits the night before by the strange Spaniard. She need not have been, for he was none other than Coley, a plain Texas cow-puncher who, with his dark face and classic features could have passed for a grandee. Part of his perfect Spanish he had learned in school, and the rest from living on the border. Rosita had her misgivings and moments of remorse about what she was doing. That is, she was glad enough to do it, but she'd hate like the devil to get caught at it. These moments were principally due to her fear of Old Neil Brannum, but largely to the fact that it all seemed so useless. If Ruth had an accepted lover and was trying to communicate with him, trying to escape the arms of a man she didn't love, it would be a different matter. But such was not the case. Ruth was trying to escape a man that Rosita considered the handsomest man she had ever seen in her life, and one that seemed to her altogether desirable as a husband. But Rosita was now well between two fires, and quite likely to roast if she didn't watch her step. Intrigue was natural to her, and she had already gone too far in the matter to turn back. If she obeyed Ruth, Brannum might never find it out. If she disobeyed the girl, she was likely to be caught between the wrath of the two of them.

Since Rosita was the recognized head of the servants, and they were all loyal to her, she could do almost anything without creating suspicion. Teresa, the cook, and Old Andreas, would do anything for her. The two Mexican boys, who were the only others about the place, were Rosita's grandsons, and would cheerfully die before they told anything. So, it was no grave thing to have one of them go early in the morning, and seek Red. What the result of such an interview might have been was not to be known. Rosita came into Ruth's room a little after sunrise, with defeat written large on her wrinkled countenance.

"The Señor Cliff Lea didn't leave last night," she said, in a tone that indicated that she considered Cliff a falsifier. "He left this morning, and the Señors Red and Coley went with him, to another part of the ranch. So, they are not leaving after all. Sylvestre heard *El Capitan* Page instruct them where to go, and they will not be back for several days."

"You should have sent Sylvestre earlier, but it can do no good to complain now."

"Tonight, *querida,* we can send a message to the Señor Cliff."

"Yes, tonight, but much else can happen before tonight. Tonight, as soon as it is dark, we should leave this hateful place. Are there any of the men about the place?"

"Sylvestre says they all went different ways, early this morning."

"Then I'll dress and get some breakfast and think over what can be done. If I can't escape otherwise, I'll walk, before I'll——"

The thought was too much for Ruth and she left the sentence unfinished.

Thinking she had the day before her in which to mature her plans, Ruth went into the patio after breakfast, and sat down on a rustic seat to meditate. She was in the midst of puzzling over the unreasonable attitude of her grandfather, when she heard a heavy step, and looking up saw Page Cothran. He was standing, hat in hand, within a few feet of her, and wearing his best smile on his dark, handsome face. So, Sylvestre had been mistaken. All the men had not left the ranch.

"How do you do this morning?" smiled Page, and then without waiting for a reply, "I was shore worried last night. Thought maybe that fall had made you kinda sick."

"No, I don't think the fall had anything to do with it. I'm quite all right now, thank you."

"Mighty glad to hear that. I've brought a plumb tame braunk this time, if you'll go riding with me."

Ruth considered a moment. Her grandfather had said she was to marry this man as soon as he asked her. He could propose quite as readily there in the patio as he could on horseback. Certainly it would be more difficult for him to attempt any liberties on horseback. So she accepted the invitation, and a few minutes later they rode away. As they rode, Ruth was thinking that she might, as a last resort, go riding with Page, suddenly ride away from him and get lost in the pear, then make her escape out of the country. That might be done, but certainly not on the horse she was riding. The poor beast had been doped until its feet were leaden.

Page lost no time. He was really becoming enamored of this beautiful girl. Besides that, the idea that she was heir to the wealth of Old Neil Brannum was all the time in the back of his head, egging him on. He began to make personal insinuations about himself and Ruth, but it was bludgeon against rapier, and her quick wit turned every thrust he made. They rode about for two hours, at the plodding gait that Ruth's poor drugged beast could make. By the time they reached the ranch-house, Page was growing desperate. As he assisted her from her horse, he caught her hand and blurted:

"Ruth, I've tried to tell you—tell you all the morning that I wanted you to marry me. Your grandfather said—said you'd marry me when I asked you, and——"

"Oh, he did say that!"

"Yes, and I hoped you'd set the day, soon. Won't you?"

"I think we had better let grandfather set it," she said, demurely, and leaving the impression that what her grandfather did about the matter would meet her approval.

"Then I'm sure it will be soon," said Page, releasing her hand with no attempt to kiss her, or otherwise caress her. "I'll see you again tonight," and mounting he rode away.

PAGE COTHRAN was by no means the first man on earth who was a bold cavalier in a dance hall and a tongue-tied boob in the presence of a pure young girl. It was rather to his credit that he was such. He had no compunction at desecrating the bridal altar by taking this innocent girl to wife. He felt sure that he would know how to behave as a husband, but as a lover for a girl of that sort, he was a failure and knew it. Still, he promised himself that now the ice was broken he'd do better for the short time until they were wed. There was little doubt that the time would be short. It didn't occur to him that Ruth had not said "yes" to him, as her grandfather had predicted.

Page had other matters of importance on his mind just then. He was now virtually the owner of the Old Floresty, and as such he must bestir himself about its business. Rich, and with a beautiful wife, he didn't intend to spend all his time in the great thicket. So, he galloped away toward the ranch-cabin at Resaca Dorado. There were some things there that needed his attention. He could easily get back by night, and then he would go to see Ruth again, and talk things over with Brannum.

Ruth Brannum stood watching Page until he went out of sight. So that clod was the man her grandfather would give her to, very much as he would give any other chattel. Possessed of a wonderful body, no mind, except the gift of greed, and no soul at all, yet a good enough husband for her. Two red spots came on her cheeks. They were the blushes of anger; and not of shame. Never would she submit to slavery like that. Hurrying to her room, she changed from her riding habit, and summoned Rosita. The old woman's eyes went wide with fright, as she saw the face of her mistress.

"Rosita, do you love me?" asked Ruth.

"Ah, *querida mia!* I do love you."

"Then you are the only creature on earth that does love me, and sometimes I almost think God has forgotten me."

"No, no, *querida!* Don't say that. God is all good."

"Anyway, he is not likely to do for me what must be done now. I'm going to leave the hacienda at once. Tonight, as soon as it is dark. I go, if I have to walk, and alone."

"But no, *querida!* You cannot do that. You must not. There is no place near that you can go to. The great thicket is full of wild animals and bad men. You would surely be in danger."

"I'm not afraid of wild animals, and there are no worse men elsewhere, than there are here. There is no worse man on earth than my grandfather."

"No, no, no! Don't say that. Señor Brannum just does not understand. It is his way, and——"

"Then you want to stay with him and leave me go alone on foot, into the great thicket?"

Poor Old Rosita! She was torn now with conflicting emotions. She really loved Ruth, as she loved no other person on earth. In the end, she would cleave to her against all odds, but this thing was impossible. She begged and pleaded, but Ruth was adamant. She spent the remainder of the day making up into two small parcels the things she would take into the wilderness with her. When Rosita would protest, Ruth would say, "Find horses, if you can. If you can't, I go on foot, as soon as night falls."

Rosita held many conferences with Sylvestre and his brother. Yes, they could get horses and saddles, when night came, and the men were asleep, but with morning they would be missed. *El Capitan* would trail them and overtake them. Rosita knew the fate of horse-thieves in the big thicket. So the hours dragged on in feverish excitement, for Rosita, and in calm, cold, relentless purpose for Ruth. The day before she had hoped much from Cliff Lea, cold and unresponsive to her plea as he had seemed. Now, that hope was gone. Be he never so willing, he couldn't help when he wasn't there. True, he had said that a message could be sent to him, but there was no time for the passing of messages now. Rosita had hinted that she would much rather undertake to place a knife in Page Cothran's heart, than to go into the great thicket on foot, but Ruth had silenced her. She would have no murder done on her account, at least she would be a party to none. She didn't know that murder had already been done on her account. That when Manuel Rubio shot the stranger he had thought he was killing Cliff Lea, to get him out of Page's way.

IT WAS almost night when Page returned from Resaca Dorado. He ate his supper hurriedly and went on to the house to tell Brannum the news, and to see Ruth, as he had promised. He might break his promises to her, some day, but not now. Old Neil had eaten his supper, waited on by Rosita as usual, but with no idea that the poor old creature was ready to drop in her tracks from fright. Ruth, he had not seen, and didn't ask about.

"Well, what have you done today?" growled Brannum, as Page came in and took a seat.

"I went riding with Ruth, today, and——"

"Well, out with it! What did you do? Stop that damned simpering and stammering, like a boy caught in mischief, and talk like a human."

"We're going to be married."

"That's better! When?"

"When you set the date."

"When *I* set it! Ho-ho! I told you so. Coming around nicely. I'll set it fast enough. It'll be tomorrow. As soon as a man can ride into Palo Alto and get a license and a justice of the peace. I'll have no damned preacher mouthing around my house. I'll call her in, and we'll talk the matter over, now."

Old Neil Brannum had no more idea what he was going to do then, than Sampson had when he pulled at the pillars. He was on the point of doing something for the house of Brannum in America, he thought, and he was—but not by any manner of means what he thought he was going to do. He stepped to the door and called Rosita, in his cracked, grating voice. There was no answer. He called her again, and cursed her soundly, but the result was the same. Then he trudged back to the kitchen. Andreas and Teresa, who were man and wife, were crouched over a little fire in the kitchen fireplace. No, señor, they had no idea where Rosita might be. Perhaps she was in the señorita's room. He went to Ruth's room, hammered on the door and called savagely. There was no reply. He opened the door and made a light. There was no one there. He routed Sylvestre and his brother. They knew less than nothing.

Then Old Neil Brannum went mad. In his rage he was frightful. He cursed everybody. Less than an hour before that, his old serving-woman had waited on him at table, as she had done every meal when he was at home, for more than thirty years. Now, she, and also his granddaughter, had vanished from the face of the earth. He sent Page flying to the bunkhouse to rout out the men, while he, with Andreas and Teresa, made a thorough search of the house.

Page came back and reported that none of the horses or saddles were gone. Several of the men had mounted, and were scouring the thickets immediately about the ranch-house.

The search went on. Old Neil Brannum was well nigh frantic. His home had been desecrated. He would have given Ruth, as a chattel, to the man he had selected for her. That, he considered was his right. But, for someone to take her from his house, under his very eyes, that was another matter altogether. There was another phase to the mysterious thing that was even worse. If she had become frightened and run away, her situation was hopeless. She'd never find her way out of the great thicket alive. A faint flash of humanity flickered in the old man's calloused soul. After all, Ruth was his granddaughter. The last of the line having his blood. The last of the Brannums in America, of which he had dreamed so much. For a little while he was dazed.

It was only for a little while, and then the old fighting spirit woke in him. He was old, but he was good for one fight and was going to have it, though he had no idea who it was to be with. Who would want to steal a woman? he asked himself. A man, of course. She knew no men in that part of the country except Page Cothran. He had seen to that, and Page was there. The only answer that he could think of was that she had known some man outside. That he had followed her there and stolen her. He almost choked with rage at the thought. Why, he'd take the trail, and when he caught the fellow he'd slit his ears, maim him for life, and leave him for the kiotys and peccaries to harry to death. He was on the point of ordering his horse for the trail, when Page Cothran came into the old living-room where he sat raging. With Page were two of the men who had ridden in a circle around the ranch, and returned.

"What is it?" demanded Brannum. "Don't stand gowking there like a damned dummy!"

"These fellows say they didn't see anybody, but they heard horses running."

"Which way did they go?"

"They couldn't tell. Seemed to go into the Palo Alto trail."

"Couldn't tell! Why in the hell didn't they follow 'em?"

"They were afraid the party was too big for them, and came back for help."

"Too big!" stormed Brannum. "This whole damned outfit couldn't whip a crippled woman! Get to hell out of here, all of you. Sleep some, if you want to. We'll hit the trail as soon as it is light enough to follow it. Couldn't see anything now. I'll show that damned woman-rustler how we handle such cattle in the pear country!"

When the men were gone, and the house-servants had slunk off to their places, knowing much more than they told, and yet not knowing the truth, Old Neil Brannum slumped into his chair. So this was the end of his dream. No! He'd be damned if it was. He was almost spent, but there was one more good fight in him. No stranger knew the pear country well enough to get away, even with a whole night's ride the start of the Floresty's wild riders. He'd lead the chase himself, at daylight. No man living could interfere with his family affairs and get away with it. Thus the half-crazed old ranchman sat on through the night in his chair. He didn't want to sleep. What he wanted was his great hairy hands at the throat of the man who had despoiled his home.

MEANTIME, what really had become of Ruth and Old Rosita? They had slipped through a small door on the opposite side of the old house from the main entrance, immediately after Page went into Brannum's room. Each of them carried a small bundle. Rosita protested the danger of going into the big thicket on foot, with tears in her eyes. Ruth calmly told her to go back if she was afraid. Rosita clung to her, and they stole into the darkness and stopped just where the grove of big trees connected with the pear thicket, to get their bearings and set their course. They had barely stopped, when a man spoke, almost at their elbows.

"Who are you?" demanded Ruth, in low, startled tones.

"I come from Señor Cliff Lea," replied the man in Spanish.

"Where is he?"

"Not far away."

"Then tell him I must have two horses, and someone to show me the way out of this terrible country."

She had scarcely finished speaking when the man was gone. While the two women stood together there in the black darkness, they heard Old Neil Brannum start the uproar at the house. They could plainly hear his bull voice, storming and swearing.

"Oh, *queredita,*" quavered Old Rosita, "the end is near. He will find us, and he will murder us."

It seemed to Ruth that they stood for ages, crouching there in terror. Lights were flashing about the house, and men were calling the names of the two women.

Ruth started violently, when the same voice said, in perfect Spanish, "This way, señorita. Follow me quickly."

They were led to a point not more than two hundred yards northwest of the house. Two men were standing on the ground, holding three horses.

"I'm Cliff Lea," said one of the men, whom Ruth couldn't recognize in the darkness. "I'm sorry, but we have no spare horses. The best we can do——"

"But my very life is in danger now," protested Ruth, "and I must have horses, to——"

"So are our lives in danger," said Cliff, in his cold, unhurried tones. "As I was about to tell you, the best we can do for you now is to take you with us, and try to find horses for you later."

"Then let's go," said Ruth, impatiently.

"All right. You'll have to ride with me, and your woman with one of the others."

"Anything is better than being discovered here and——"

There was a fresh outburst of yelling and calling all about the house. Ruth felt herself lifted bodily to the saddle. Cliff mounted behind her, and they followed the western edge of the grove, going south to where the Palo Alto trail led off through the thicket. Red followed, with Old Rosita behind him and clinging on for life, while Coley brought up the rear. Neither of the partners had any idea they were being let in for a deal like this. Stealing women was out of their line, but if Cliff said to do it, they were game.

As they turned west into the trail, with the lights of the house blinking through the trees, they heard two horsemen calling within fifty yards of them. Cliff was reaching around Ruth with his long arms, his hands on the saddle-horn. She felt his arms stiffen against her, on either side, and the horse whirled into the trail and shot away in the darkness. When they had ridden for half an hour, Ruth felt the horse turn sharp to the right and pick its way slowly through the brush. Presently, it stopped and Cliff called back, softly, to the others. They answered and he said:

"Keep close, now." Then to the girl, "Keep your head down, Miss Brannum," and headed his horse into a solid black wall.

Half an hour later, Ruth and Rosita were comfortably housed in the little cabin that stood in the midst of the pear thicket. A little way from the cabin, a small fire burnt, and Cliff Lea sat on the ground staring into it. Red and Coley had unsaddled the horses, turned them loose, and were squatting on the ground, talking in low tones, a hundred feet away.

INSIDE the cabin, Ruth Brannum sat on one of the bunks, which was covered with clean, new blankets. Old Rosita squatted over a tiny fire in the fireplace, and pattered prayers for deliverance. Ruth had much to think about. She didn't know where she was, but she had always known there were hidden places in the big thicket. She knew nothing about the gaunt, cold man, who had brought her there. He had said he would try to get horses for her, but his voice was cold and hard as ice. He had not spoken to her on the wild ride from the ranch, except the one time, when he told her to keep her head down.

Ruth peered through a crack in the cabin wall, and could see him now, the red light of the fire bringing his rugged, tanned face into relief against the night. Rosita had said he was a common cowhand. Instinctively, she knew he was more than that. She thought of how deftly and gently he had bathed her face. He might be an outlaw. He might be anything, for she knew there were all sorts of men in the big thicket, but she would never believe he could be anything but gentle, with a woman. Still, she wanted to know what her position was. Cliff had said his life was in danger. If she was in the hands of a man upon whose head there was a price, she wanted to know what he meant to do with her. In spite of her situation, she felt a strange quickening of her heart, as she pushed aside the blanket that served as a door shutter and stepped outside. Cliff Lea was on his feet instantly, and standing, hat in hand.

"Sit down, Mr. Lea," said Ruth, compelling herself to speak calmly. "I want to talk to you."

"I'm honored," said Cliff, gravely, resuming his seat only after Ruth had seated herself on the ground.

"Where are we, Mr. Lea?"

"Where no one can find you, in a month of searching, unless you want to be found, and I want you to be found."

"Do—do you mean I'm a prisoner?"

"No, ma'am. I brought you here at your own request. I'll take you back to where I found you, tonight if you wish, but I would be placing myself, and you, in great danger."

"No, no, no! I don't want to go back there, but—but I can't stay hidden here in the big thicket indefinitely."

"No," said Cliff, slowly, "not indefinitely. Just now, though, I think it the safest for you to be. I take it that you ran away, to keep from marrying Page Cothran before you—got acquainted with him."

"I ran away because I loathe the thought of such a thing, at any time. No matter where I go, or what happens, I don't think I'll find any worse men than my grandfather."

"You might find a great many worse men, and few that are better, in the pear country. It is just a matter of viewpoint that——"

"Then if you agree with grandfather giving me away, as if I were a chattel, a slave, why have you helped me even this much?"

"I agree with Mr. Brannum in many things, but not in the matter of marrying his daughter to Page Cothran, unless——"

"Unless what?"

"Unless you should come to love him."

"Which I shall never do."

"Then I don't think he should insist upon your marrying the young man."

"Tell me, then, where I am, and what

you mean to do with me, now that I'm here?"

"I can't answer either of those questions. I'm going to do the best I can, when the time comes for action. I make no promises what that best will be."

The firelight turned Ruth's hair to a golden halo, and her blue eyes looked almost black. In spite of his apparent coldness, Cliff Lea was intensely human. When he had held Ruth in his arms that morning, and again when he had bathed her face so gently, a feeling had been awakened in him that he had supposed was dead. When she had told him of Brannum's purpose to marry her to Page Cothran, without consulting her wishes, it had roused hot rage in his heart. Now, as he sat looking at her, with somber, smouldering eyes, he knew that he loved this woman. He had nothing to offer her, but his life. He was standing that moment at a crisis in his life. This girl had the ordering of what his life would be, from then on. He wanted to tell her that, but knew he must not. So, when——

"Don't you think——" began Ruth.

"I think, Miss Brannum, that you should go to bed, and try to get some sleep. I assure you there is no place in the world where you would be safer from harm. Perhaps, tomorrow will decide many things."

"Thank you," said Ruth, and rose to obey the suggestion. He had virtually told her that he didn't want her to talk further and that she should go to bed. Still, there was such a note of gentleness in his tone that she couldn't be offended. At the cabin door, she turned. He was standing by the fire. She hadn't noticed before how tall he was, and how broad his shoulders. "Good night," she said, and passing inside, dropped the curtain.

Long after the rest of the camp was wrapped in slumber, Cliff Lea sat staring into the whitening embers of the little fire. He was thinking of what life was, as he knew it; and of what it would be. He was also wondering what would take place in another twenty-four hours, and whether he would be living at that time. He knew that death might lurk in any pear thicket he passed, and he was going to pass some. At last, he stretched his gaunt body on the ground, pillowed his head on his arm, and went to sleep.

CHAPTER VI

CHUB SEES NICE BUSINESS AGAIN

WHEN Ruth pulled the blanket aside and peeped out next morning, Cliff Lea was not in sight. Red and Coley, sleeves rolled to elbows, were cooking breakfast over the campfire. They both looked up, just as she was about to drop the curtain.

"Coley, did you know we got ary angel in that drag last night?" Red asked, in an awed tone.

Neither of the partners had ever seen Ruth before, except as a blurred form in the night.

"No, I didn't," replied Coley, "and I don't know it yet. A woman as pretty as that can start a heap of hell in this little old world."

"She don't look rough to me," whispered Red. "I don't blame Cliff for bustin' into her game, whatever it is."

Coley made no reply, but went on broiling veal steak, and stacking it on a platter. He was reserving his opinion of the situation. A pleasing odor came from an oven, as Red lifted the lid to observe a browning loaf. This, blended with the aroma of boiling coffee, reached the cabin.

"Come and get it!" yelled Red.

"Did someone call?" asked Ruth, stepping out the door a moment later.

"No'm. I just said chuck's ready for them that wants it."

"And I want it," smiled Ruth and called to Rosita. "Where's Mr. Lea?"

"I don't know, ma'am. He was here last night, but it looks like he sorty got misplaced in his sleep, and——"

Red broke off suddenly, for Cliff Lea was galloping across the glade toward them. He dismounted, greeted Ruth, then ate breakfast with the others in silence.

As soon as the meal was over, Cliff rose and picking up a bucket, said, "Everybody works here. Miss Brannum, will you help me bring a bucket of water from the well."

Ruth smiled, thought of the clumsy manner in which Page Cothran would have tried to get her out of the crowd, and walked away with him. The well in the arroyo was scarcely out of earshot of the camp. When they reached it, Cliff set the bucket down, and said:

"I might have been able to carry two gallons of water that distance, alone," and there was a fine light of humor in his gray eyes. "The fact is, Miss Brannum, I have to tell you something. We will ride away from here in a few minutes. I'm going to trust you with the key to this place, and ask you not to use it until necessity drives you to it."

"How long would that be?"

"Say three days. If none of us are back in that time, we'll never be back. There is plenty of food to last that long, and Rosita can cook it."

"I'll promise to wait that long, but where are you going."

"To hunt some horses for you and Rosita," and there was an odd smile in Cliff's eyes.

"You're going into danger, Mr. Lea."

"Every pear thicket I pass is a potential danger, but I'm used to that. I only hope it doesn't happen until you have no further need of my services. I——"

Cliff bit off what he was about to say, and Ruth held back what was on her own tongue.

"And the key," she said, instead, "in the event I should need it."

"It is this. About midway the east side of this glade there is a deep pocket in the pear. To the left of the entrance you will see a broad leaf on which has been cut the word 'out'. Standing by that sign and looking straight into the pocket, you will see another leaf, marked L. Go to that and turn to the left Straight ahead of you will be another, marked R. Turn here to the right, and you will be in sight of the next sign. There may be two right turns, or two left turns, but follow them, and they'll take you out. I wouldn't tell you this, but I believe you'll wait here three days before you try it. If I'm not back by that time, I'll never be."

"Mr. Lea, you're going into danger for me." There was a slight tremor in her voice. There is a peculiar thrill to a woman the first time she knows, or thinks a man is endangering his life for her.

"Yes," said Cliff, "I may as well be frank. At the same time, I may as well tell the whole truth. My life is in danger anyway, anywhere in the pear country."

"But you might win your way out, were it not for serving me."

"That is not open to discussion," said Cliff. "I'd hate for you to think I valued my life that much." Picking up the bucket, he led the way back to camp.

Ten minutes later, when Cliff was about to mount his horse, Ruth put out her hand and he took it.

"I don't know what risks you are going to take on my account," she said, "but in the event—in the event you shouldn't come back, I want you to feel that I appreciate your kindness."

Their eyes met. Swift as the dart of a swallow, Cliff raised her hand to his lips, and without a word, swung to his saddle and was gone. She watched him and the partners cross the arroyo to the west, and disappear in the thicket. Cliff didn't look back. She looked down at her hand, seeming to still feel that hot kiss on the back of it, then sighed, and turned toward the cabin.

Ruth had plenty to think about now, and nothing to do but think. Naturally, she was thinking just now about Cliff Lea. What was he, anyway? No common cowhand, she was sure. In her childhood she had heard strange tales of hunted men, who hid for years in that great wilderness of pear cactus and thorny shrubs. Men who had come to know every intricate turn in the maze of trails, every glade and waterhole. Men upon whose heads there was a price. Could Cliff Lea be one of these? True, he had been a cowhand at the old ranch, as had been the two men with him, but might he not, at the same time, be the head of a band of outlaws? Such things had happened. Here was no ordinary man. He rarely spoke to the men called Red and Coley, and yet they seemed to obey his every wish, and follow him without question. Whatever else he might be, here was a leader of men. Here, too, was one who could break a woman's heart. The sort of grim, silent man, who could be wonderfully gentle and tender, that a woman could worship. When would she see him again, and would there come a time when she would wish she had never seen him. And so her thoughts ran on.

CLIFF LEA had ridden out at the east side of the thicket before daylight. When he returned and ate breakfast, there was nothing in his grim face to indicate that he had seen something that disturbed him. What he had seen, as he watched by the trailside at dawn, was the entire Notey Beney outfit, with Old Neil Brannum at their head, go galloping toward Palo Alto. They had struck his trail, and having no idea that he had turned into the thicket the night before, they were heading for the old cowtown, without knowing who it was they were following. So, when Cliff and his two followers rode west from the cabin in the thicket, they, too, were heading for the old cowtown, with its battle-scarred, bullet-torn 'dobe walls. There was promise that Chub, the barkeep, would have another "sweet day's business," but with little music and dancing.

When the three riders were out of the big thicket, Cliff stopped until the others came up to him.

"Boys," he said, "I'm going to Palo Alto, and there's a good chance that I'll stay there. You boys have seen me gamble a little. Today, I'm going to put everything on earth on the table. If I don't win, I don't want to come out of it. It's likely to be rough. You don't have to go into the game if you don't want to. A man has a right to say how high the stakes are, in any game he plays."

"If you aim to roll 'em that high, you're apt to need some sweaters," said Red.

"The understanding was that we three throw in together and you lead the deal," Coley said. "I don't aim to quit when it gets a little rough."

"All right, boys. I expected you'd be like that. We're pretty apt to get into a quarrel if we run into the Notey Beney outfit, for they don't know we've quit. All I ask of you is to stay with me until I'm down. If I go out, take my horse, and do your best to get back to the cabin in the thicket. When you get there, do whatever Miss Brannum wants you to do. If she wants to get out of the country, get her out the quickest and safest way you can."

Cliff didn't tell them any more. He didn't wait for an answer. It wasn't a request, it was a command. They turned into the trail and jogged on toward Palo Alto.

Brannum and his men reached the old town fully an hour ahead of the three riders. As they rode in, Chub looked at the monte dealer.

"There's hell again," he said. "Old Notey Beney and that gang of killers of his'n is after somebody."

"Yes," replied the dealer, "and they'll have some right good help. Bud Rolfe and that halfbreed shadow of his are in town and seem to be waiting for something."

Bud Rolfe was leaning against a hitchrack. Page dismounted and went directly to him.

"Well, have you done it?" asked Page, in a low tone.

"Done what?"

"Didn't you get my message?"

"Nope. I got no message."

"Didn't Cliff tell you?"

"Ain't saw Cliff."

"What! Didn't Cliff and Red and Coley come to Loma Roja yesterday!"

"Shore didn't."

Page spoke rapidly to Bud Rolfe for a few minutes and Bud nodded understandingly. Then Page called to Old Man Brannum. When he came up, Page said:

"I reck'n we got the right dope the first rattle out'n the box, Mr. Brannum. Finding out everything at one time. I give Cliff Lea and Red and Coley orders to go to Loma Roja yesterday morning. Bud says they ain't been there. That makes it pretty plain they all three been mixed up with the driving of them N B heifers and——"

"Damn the cattle!" snapped Neil Brannum. "What I'm after is the outfit that's taken two women away from my house last night."

"Well, it looks reasonable that they done that, too. They've broke with the Floresty outfit. They was the only ones that knew Miss Ruth was at the ranch, and Cliff Lea has got the nerve to do anything. I been knowing all along he was bad. He could make Red and Coley jump through a hoop, too."

"Huh! I'll ask Chub about 'em." And Old Neil stalked into the Green Tree. "Chub, have you seen Cliff Lea in town, yesterday or this morning?"

"Seen him yesterday 'bout noon. He rides in, buys a roll of stuff, and packs it out of town. Looked like he might be goin' to some cow outfit."

"Which way did he ride?"

"Back to'ds the Floresty."

"Red or Coley, ary one with him?"

"Nope. By himself."

"Got a bunch of cattle on the drive, I guess," offered Page Cothran.

"I — told — you — damn them cattle!" shouted Old Man Neil. "We ain't lookin' for cattle rustlers, right now. We're lookin' for woman rustlers. Chub, have you seen ary outfit in town last night or this morning, that had a couple of stray women with 'em?"

"Not nary thing like that, this morning nor this month."

Old Neil went on questioning. He didn't know what else to do. The tracks of the marauders led toward Palo Alto. He knew Chub would lie all day for a dollar and he was trying to catch him. Meantime, Page edged away to where Bud Rolfe stood just outside the door.

"Bud, hell's goin' to pop. If Cliff Lea rides in here, get him first and explain afterward."

"For why?"

"Because he knows too much. That's why I sent him to you, and sent you a message that you'd understand. I wanted him got."

"How come you sending me orders?"

"Because I'm foreman of the whole outfit now. Old Notey Beney would have told you himself, if he hadn't been all riled up about this other business."

"What is this other business?"

"Just listen to the Old Man rave, and you'll find out. Main thing is, get Cliff Lea as soon as you see him."

"Yep. Ever see anybody get Cliff? Why don't you get him?" And Bud Rolfe showed his even teeth in a tantalizing grin.

Before Page could reply, Brannum called them into the saloon and bought drinks for the crowd. Brannum went on asking Chub questions in an effort to catch him in a lie. At last he gave it up and said:

"You boys stay here and take some more drinks if you want to, but keep together. I aim to look around a bit, and when I get a lead, we'll ride and ride hard."

HALF a block up the street, and on the same side, was the one big general store of the town. Here was the post-office, banking business, and practically all the heavy commerce.

As Brannum entered the door of this place Mel Woodson, the grim, grizzled old merchant who had himself been a sheepherder in the old days, said, "Just looking for you, Neil. Man back in the office wants to see you."

"Who is he?" asked Neil Brannum.

"One of your men, I think," evaded the merchant.

By this time they had entered the little private office at the back of the store, and there stood Cliff Lea!

"What the hell are you doing here?" snapped Brannum. "Didn't you have orders to go to Loma Roja?"

"Yes, but I didn't go." There was a cold, compelling note in Cliff's voice, as he went on, "It'll pay you to behave yourself for once in your life and listen to me."

"Hell it will! Why?"

"Because I'm the only one that can help you out of the hole you're in. I've been wanting to tell you some things for a year, but I couldn't do it without you taking a shot at me. Now you can shoot and be damned. I'm going to tell you where your cattle are going and——"

"There *you* go about them damned cattle! Page has been trying to tell me about the cattle. He says the cattle rustler is like enough to be the woman rustler that got my granddaughter away from home, and he says you rustled the cattle."

"He's a liar and he isn't guessing. You'll never find your granddaughter until you get the men that got your cattle. Send for John Raney, Bud Rolfe's halfbreed shadow, and get him in here. He can tell——"

"See here, Cliff, are you running this thing?" asked Brannum in amazement. He couldn't believe that he was letting one of his cowhands talk to him in that manner.

"I mean to run my part of it. If you don't do as I tell you, you'll be sorry for it within an hour."

"Do you know where Ruth is?" countered Brannum.

"Yes."

"Tell me, or——"

"I'll see you damned first! Get Raney in here and I'll help you find her. Otherwise——"

A few minutes later the breed walked square into the trap. He had his hands in the air and was looking into Cliff's gun before he realized what was happening. When he was disarmed and seated, Cliff began:

"Now, John, you have a chance to save your own skin. I know all about how and when Page Cothran and Bud Rolfe stole a thousand N B heifers and drove them across the Rio Grande. You didn't get anything out of it but a little extra pay, and if you'll just tell Mr. Brannum the truth, you'll go free."

Brannum almost choked with astonishment, but managed to keep quiet and listen. Raney, with death staring him in the face from the cold, hard eyes of Cliff Lea, told the whole story. How Page, as *vecero,* had kept Bud informed when the way was clear, and where the other outfits were working. How two other bosses were in league with Page and Bud, one of them being the boss at Resaca Dorado.

"All right," said Cliff, when the man had finished his story. "Now, you listen to me. You're free, but you'll have to take care of yourself. If you go back to Page and Bud, I'm going to kill you. If they find out that you have told, they'll kill you. Pay your money and take your choice, but get out of here before I change my mind."

Cliff gave the fellow his gun, over Brannum's protest, and he sneaked out. Cliff had an idea he would get his horse and beat it out of town as quick as he could.

"Now what are you going to do?" asked Cliff.

"Ain't but one thing to do, as far as I can see," Brannum said. "That's to go down to the Green Tree and call 'em on it. Trouble is, I don't know, now, whether any of my men will stay with me."

"I'll stay with you!"

"All right, let's go."

There was no yellow streak in Old Neil Brannum, whatever his other sins. There was still one more fight in him and he was on the way to it at that moment.

JOHN RANEY had stopped just outside the door of the Green Tree, to consider his next move, and looking up toward the store he saw something that decided him. As Cliff and Brannum passed toward the front of the store, Red and Coley came out of a wareroom and joined them. Raney now saw the four heading for the Green Tree, Cliff had said he would kill the breed if he returned to Page and Bud. Raney decided that his only chance was to get in his own crowd. If Brannum and Cliff were killed, Bud would never know that he had betrayed him. The breed sprang into the door, and sought Bud and Page, who were at the back end of the bar.

Brannum and Cliff stepped through the saloon door together, with Red and Coley at their heels. Two guns roared inside, as if at a signal. A bullet sheared away one side of Cliff's hat brim. For once, Page Cothran was caught where he had to fight, and he fought like a demon. Remembering Manuel Rubio's attempt on his life, and feeling sure that Page had instigated it, Cliff set coolly and methodically to work. He worked fast, and he didn't miss.

In thirty seconds after they entered the door, Old Neil Brannum was on the floor. One bullet had broken the bone in his left thigh, and another had passed within an inch of his liver. One of Coley's arms was hanging limply by his side, and he was trying to reload his gun with one hand. Red was on the floor, untouched, and grinning like a possum. He had merely squatted down for the convenience of the bullets that wanted to pass that way. Cliff Lea had stepped to the side of the door and was calmly reloading. That half minute had seen one of the most terrific battles that the Green Tree had ever known, and it had known many. Page Cothran was out, his body fairly riddled with bullets. Raney was down, and Bud Rolfe, the terror of the old town, was leaning against the end of the bar, his face already gray, tugging at cartridges in his belt as he reloaded an empty gun. The loyal N B men had been so taken by surprise that they didn't know what to do. They couldn't understand Old Notey Beney's foreman and some of his men opening on him like that. Most of them merely got out of the line of fire and watched the fight. Every gun was empty at the end of that half minute, and as Cliff shoved the last cartridge into his gun, he called out to Rolfe:

"Put up your hands, Bud. I don't want to kill you."

"You won't!" snapped Rolfe, with an oath, as his gun roared and a bullet seared a mark across the side of Cliff's neck. At the same instant, Red's gun blazed from the floor, and the bullet tore away half of Rolfe's head.

That ended the battle, but the Green Tree was in a mess. The back end of the bar, where Page and Rolfe had stood together as Raney gave them warning, was riddled with bullets, and the mirror behind it was a wreck. The front door would need reglazing and other repairs. The wounded were taken to the hotel, and a doctor got to work on Old Neil Brannum. He found that both bullets had gone through, and on about their business, so there was no probing to do.

"I got to get home, doc," growled the old ranchman. "Hell's to pay there."

"Better get a hack and go right away, then. You can stand the trip better now than you will a few hours later."

While a hack was being got ready, Brannum had Cliff called in. He looked the lanky puncher up and down.

"Cliff, it is shore a pity for as good a fighter as you are to be the sorty man you are. A cattle rustler is bad enough, but a woman rustler is lower than the belly of a swaybacked snake. You got me where you can use me, now, but if you're any sort of man, you'll tell me where Ruth is, so I can send somebody after her, if you won't go."

"I don't think I'll tell you, now, where she is. I will tell you that she's safe and comfortable, and I'll bring her to you tomorrow."

"*You'll* bring her? Have you had her all the time?"

"No, only part of the time."

The old ranchman flew into a rage, and the doctor cautioned him to keep quiet. The hack drove up and they loaded him in, still telling the world how low a woman rustler was in his estimation. The procession started for the ranch. Old Neil Brannum lay on a bed in the body of the hack. Coley, one arm in a sling, sat on the seat with the driver. The only thing Cliff said to him as he was about to start was, "let me do the talking," and nothing could have been got from him with rack and thumbscrews. The unwounded of the Notey Beney outfit acted as escort and led the vacant horses.

Cliff and Red rode out of town together, leading Coley's horse. It was so late that it would be after dark when they reached the cabin in the thicket. Chub, the barkeep, and his monte dealer stood in the door of the Green Tree again.

"Told you they was the makin's of a mess in that Notey Beney outfit," said the monte dealer.

"Yes," snapped Chub, "and I wish you'd pull yo' prophesying somewhere else if it's all going to turn out like this. Three of the best spenders on this part of the range gets planted in the morning. This orta been a good day's business and—it wasn't. I'm going to put up a sign: 'Drink inside, and go out doors to die.' Tired of having my place messed up."

"Might be a good idea, but them two gangs ain't going to fight no more. They ain't but one side of the fight left, and——"

"Long as Cliff Lea's left, that's enough. Wonder where Old Notey Beney's gal is."

"Huh! They been raising so much hell, I forgot all about the gal. I—wonder—where—she—is—myself!"

CHAPTER VII

A NIGHT BENEATH THE STARS

THAT bright, sunny October day was the longest of Ruth Brannum's life. Every hour of the day some thought came to her of the cold, hard, unsmiling face of Cliff Lea. Time and again she wondered if he was passing some dangerous pear thicket at that moment. As the hours dragged on and the shadow turned to the east side of the cabin there in that vast solitude, Ruth realized that no man before had ever affected her as this grim rider had done. She had a glimpse of his feeling, too, in that swift kiss on the back of her hand. It seemed that she could still feel it. It was such a quaint, old world expression of his feeling of humility before her, she thought. Many another man would have boldly kissed her lips, since she was in his power and had come of her own accord. She debated in her mind what she would do or say, if Cliff came back alive. Her inherent Scotch caution was pulling one way, with suggestions of what the man's character might be; while the human woman of her was pulling equally hard the other. And so the battle went on as she watched the shadow of the cabin lengthen.

Ruth became so restless at last that she could keep quietly to the cabin no longer. She left Rosita to keep house, while she walked across to the east side of the glade. She found the big pear leaf, with its mark of the exit from her prison. The door was open, and she could go when she pleased. No, she had promised to wait three days. Three more days like this would be an eternity, but she would wait. Yes, she'd wait longer than that. She'd wait as long as there was hope, and a hot flush came to her face at the thought.

She turned back, and when she reached the cabin she saw that the giant cactus on the west side of the glade was casting long shadows and peopling the silent glade with grotesquely deformed gnomes of immense stature. Night would come soon, now, and there must be a fire and light. That was another matter. She called Rosita to help her and set feverishly to work gathering up dead branches and stacking them in a great heap near the little pile of white ashes that had been the campfire.

The sun went down, and the tall giants, having marched on across the glade, dissolved and disappeared. Ruth broke small sticks and raked in the ashes for fire. There were no live coals! Oh, well, there would be matches in the cabin, but she searched in vain. The lantern couldn't be lit. They couldn't cook food. She'd have to break her word to Cliff Lea and leave before the three days were up. Why, she would have to go at once. They couldn't stay there through the night, in total darkness. No, she could never find the way out in darkness. She wouldn't go, anyway. She'd eat raw food before she'd break her word.

Night fell over the silent place as if some great sable bird had spread its wings over the world, and a few dim stars showed high in the dark blue sky. A great gray wolf, whose cry was like that of a woman in terror, had entered the glade, attracted there by the smell of the fresh meat. The brute gave a terrifying scream. Ruth's scalp prickled with fright and Rosita pattered prayers. They sat in the door of the cabin, because it was even darker inside and there was only a blanket for a door, which would keep nothing out.

After a few minutes silence, they heard footfalls. Would the wolf attack them? Louder and nearer they came, and then a horse snorted. Would that be one of the three riders who had brought them there or did someone else know the way to the cabin? Ruth could hear the blood pounding in her ears as two riders stopped a little way from the cabin. There should be three of them, she thought.

"Is—is that you, Cliff—I mean, Mr. Lea?" she called.

"Yes, ma'am," replied Cliff's familiar, drawling voice. "Why are you sitting in the dark?"

"The fire went out and we had no matches." Ruth's voice was trembling, now, and it was not altogether on account of fright.

"They're in a little baking powder can on the shelf in the corner," Cliff said. "Store them there to keep the chipmunks from them. Sorry I didn't think to tell you."

A moment later a tiny blaze flickered at the campfire. Ruth saw Cliff's face, as if chiseled in red bronze on a ground of ebony. Never had a human face meant so much to her. Without design on anyone's part she had been given a little of the acid test of loneliness that Old Neil Brannum was unable to give her, and she was unconsciously reacting to it.

Supper was prepared and eaten in silence. Soon afterward Red took his blankets to a considerable distance from the cabin and lay down. He was ready to call it a day. Old Rosita took the lantern and discreetly retired to the cabin. The two young people, sitting there in the dim red glow of the campfire, seemed carrying on a contest of silent meditation.

At last, Ruth said, "You brought only one horse."

"That's Coley's horse."

"Was he—was he——"

"No. Only his arm was broken. They took him to the ranch." And then Cliff told her simply of the battle at the Green Tree and of Brannum's wounds. He told her that the ranchman had been taken home, along with Coley.

"Poor grandfather!" sighed Ruth. "He'll need me, now."

"Do you want to go tonight?"

"No, I—I——"

"When you wish." And Cliff went on staring into the fire.

After another long silence, while Cliff supposed Ruth was trying to decide whether she wanted to go back to the ranch immediately, she spoke again, and it wasn't about going anywhere.

"Mr. Lea, you are not like the other men here in the pear country. How did you come here?"

"I made a great mistake—once."

"Was it—was it a really great mistake. The kind that causes men to come to the pear country and—and hide?"

"It caused me to do that."

"What was it?" she almost whispered.

Cliff looked at her and there was a twisted smile on his grim lips.

"I believed a woman loved me and—that I loved her. When she learned that I had nothing but a university degree and some good intentions, she decided that she didn't love me, and I—I came to the pear country."

"But that wasn't a crime!"

"She didn't seem to think so." There was cold irony in his words. "At least, she was never tried for it."

"I mean you didn't commit any crime."

"No, I never committed a crime in my life. I was never charged with one until today."

"Today! Who charged you with a crime? Not I."

"No, it was your grandfather."

"Grandfather! After all you did for him. What did he accuse you of?"

"I'm afraid I wasn't doing all that for him," said Cliff gravely. "He said I was the lowest thing in human form—a woman rustler."

"But you are not, really?"

"I don't know. There is many a thief born in the world who never steals anything—because he lacks the courage. I may have been born a thief, but a woman's love is one thing that I don't think I could ever steal, or even beg. It seems to me——"

"You would never have to beg or steal if——"

Cliff looked into her blue eyes, saw his message there, and extended his arms in silence.

"*Querida mia!*" called Rosita from the cabin door. "It is very late and the night is getting cool."

"Good night!" said Ruth, and entering the cabin dropped the curtain over the door.

All the grimness was gone from Cliff Lea's face. Joy had been snatched from him by the watchful old duenna, but he knew now that it was only a temporary loss. So, spreading his blankets he, too, called it a day. Not perfect, perhaps, but with an almost perfect ending. One at least that he meant to perfect.

SOON after sunrise next morning they took their way out of the great thicket. With Ruth and Rosita on Coley's horse, Cliff led the way through the winding, hidden trail, while Red brought up the rear. When they came in sight of *El Rancho de la Florestra,* Ruth was surprised to see how the place had changed. It no longer reminded her of a cemetery. The white patches of wall showing through the green grove seemed to be smiling a welcome to her. The doctor, who had been there all night, was just leaving. To their inquiry as to the condition of his testy patient, he said:

"Pretty weak, but he'll pull through. He's yelling for you, Cliff, and the sooner you get to him, the sooner he'll be quiet and behave himself."

"Hasn't he asked for me at all?" said Ruth.

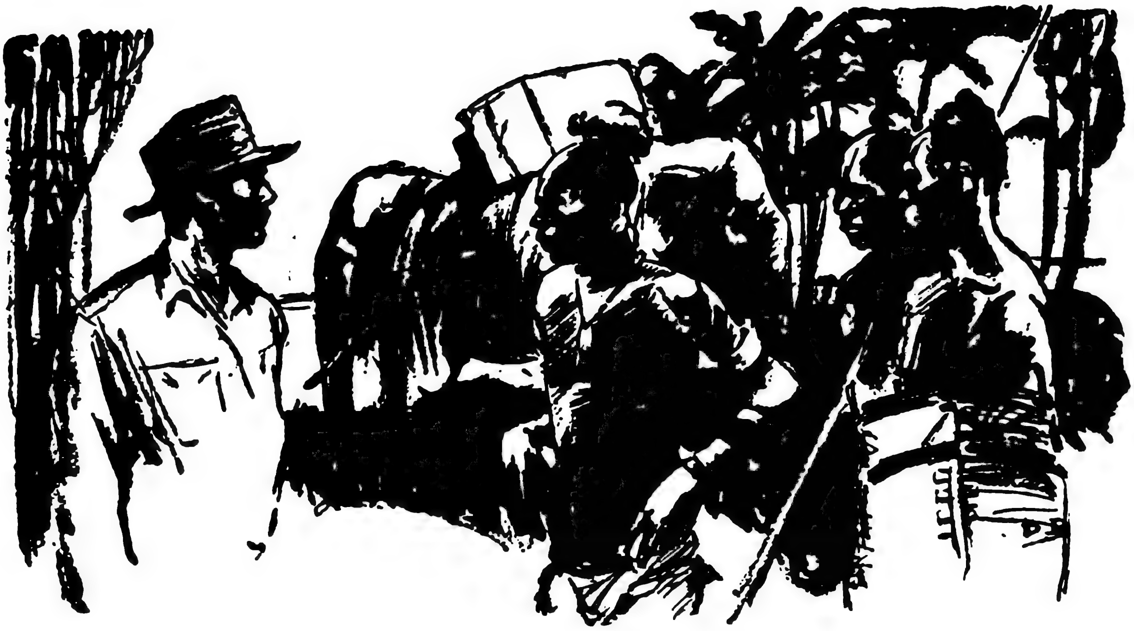
"No, ma'am. I guess he thought you'd be together," replied the doctor, bluntly. Ruth's face blushed, and the doctor went on to his horse, apparently without noticing it.

When they entered the room where Old Neil Brannum was in bed, propped up with pillows. He looked up at them, his face ashen with pain, and his eyes unduly bright. Certainly not the man who had driven Ruth to the ranch, so long ago.

"Why'n't you wait until the resurrection?" he snapped, and then a grim smile bent his hard lips, as he read their faces and he went on. "Cliff, I won't be able to ride for a month or two—maybe never again. You're foreman of the Floresty, and I want you to get on the job." Then he turned his eyes to Ruth, and said: "I want to apologize to you, Ruth. I ain't got as much man-pickin' sense as a *javelina* hog. That's all. I want to go to sleep, now."

They turned away, and had reached the door, when Old Neil Brannum called in his cracked voice. "Come back here a minute, Cliff." Then when Cliff returned and bent over him, he went on in a hoarse whisper that easily reached Ruth at the door. "I take back what I said about you being a woman rustler. I think she rustled you and done a damned good job of it. I won't be here long. The Old Floresty and what's on it is for you two. All I ask is that you name the first boy Neil."

As they stepped out into the patio, which now seemed a paradise, they stopped under the orange tree. Ruth's face was still flaming scarlet, so what should she do but hide it against Cliff's shoulder, as he took her to his arms.



"Tales of the Teak Forest"

Even Justice

Of Ai Luang and the Twenty Thousand Ticals

By REGINALD CAMPBELL

JOHN HINTON, jungle-wallah and hardened man of the wilds, stood at the threshold of his tent one brilliant March morning, swearing roundly. His best new saddle, which had but recently come up to the head of the railway from distant Bangkok, and which had cost him the large sum of two hundred and fifty ticals, had been spirited away from his camp the previous night, and well he knew that the chances of its recovery were small.

Hinton peered into the encircling jungle, as if to search out its secrets. The hot weather being at its worst, the forest was now one gigantic army of tall trees, blanched, yellow, leafless, sucked dry by the fiery rays of a sun that glared each day out of heavens the color of smoky brass. Even the little watercourse that ran behind his tent was now a dry, tumbled mass of shining stones, and no green was to be seen anywhere, save for some coconut palms that reared their heads above the wilderness a few hundred yards to the right of his camp.

At the sight of the palms Hinton's gray eyes hardened, for they denoted the beginning of the little native village of Ban Onn, of which Ai Luang the deceitful was the headman.

Now Ai Luang was the oldest, wisest and most cunning village headman in all Northern Siam, and Hinton shrewdly suspected that the ancient was responsible for stealing the saddle, but to bring the theft home on Ai Luang would, in view of the old scoundrel's cunning, be well nigh impossible.

Yes, reflected Hinton, as he turned back into his tent, it was a nuisance that he had been obliged to camp so close to Ban Onn, but the previous evening two of his baggage elephants had gone dead lame, with the result that he had been compelled to halt forthwith and make a temporary resting place near the village, where he must remain for at least two days until his elephants should be fit to travel again.

There was also an added reason for Hinton wishing to leave the locality as soon as possible. This was the presence in his tent of ten small, square wooden boxes, nestling underneath his bed. And each of these boxes contained an average of two thousand silver ticals in specie, or twenty thousand ticals in all. It was a lot of money with which to be traveling in a wild, rolling country, far away from civilization; but banks being non-existent in the teak forests of Upper Siam, the only method of obtaining cash from Bangkok for the working expenses of Hinton's company was for the white man to meet the northbound train at the head of the railway, take delivery of the boxes, and with them travel back to his forest, six days' march away.

So now here he was, halfway back on his return journey, with two of his elephants lame, his saddle stolen, and twenty thousand ticals' worth of specie lying within a few hundred yards of a wily old village headman.

Hinton frowned and, as by now the brilliance of the sun was like a live thing, called for his boy to bring him a lime squash. The servant handed it to him, then coughed and shifted his feet uneasily, as though some matter were on his mind.

"Well, what is it?" demanded Hinton.

"Lord," whispered the boy uneasily, "in the camp it is said that the Ka Mooi gang has been following us these last two days. Lord, it is feared there is bad business afoot."

At the mention of the gang Hinton whistled, for he had heard of them. They were five robbers who, working together, had for the last few weeks harried many peaceful, defenceless jungle villages. Cattle, pigs, chickens, even clothing had been exacted from the helpless occupants, and only the village of Ban Onn had up till now been spared, though Hinton guessed that this was from no motive of mercy on the part of the robbers, but because they feared the old villain who acted as its headman. They had not, indeed, committed actual murder to date, consequently a price of only fifty ticals had been placed on each of their heads, a sum for which no villager, save perhaps Ai Luang, would dare to betray them.

But now—Hinton's frown deepened—the robbers were near Ban Onn, and should they join forces with Ai Luang in order to rob him of the specie, he would be up against a very formidable combination indeed. He did not, certainly, suspect them of the theft of the saddle—Ai Luang was responsible for that, he was sure. No, they were out for larger game in the shape of the boxes, and it behoved him to tread warily.

For a while he remained deep in thought, then he shouted to his boy and ordered him to summon Ai Luang immediately to his tent.

BY NOON, when the crickets were shrilling on the trees, and the parched earth groaning under the fierce brilliance of the midday sun, the old man, white haired, wizened, a mere dried-up rattle of bones and skin, crawled into the tent and salaamed profoundly before Hinton.

"Ai Luang," said the white man, "I have lost a saddle. It was a very good saddle."

The ancient spread deprecatory hands. It was terrible, unthinkable, unbelievable to hear of the Lord's misfortune. Perhaps a devil—but Hinton cut him short.

"In my tent," said he, slowly, "as doubtless Ai Luang knows, I have much money belonging to the Great Company."

"Lord, I know nought of this."

"Which is strange," replied Hinton. "Are boxes of silver, carried on elephant back, so small and so light that no one knows of their presence?"

"As the Lord wills," said Ai Luang meekly.

"Now supposing," resumed Hinton leisurely, "supposing that this money is stolen while I am still near your village, what will happen to Ai Luang?"

"Lord, I do not understand. Why should ought happen to Ai Luang?"

"Ai Luang will come to great trouble," barked Hinton suddenly.

The headman shifted on his haunches, and his wrinkled features wore an air of pained surprise. The Lord Hinton was not fair to him; the Lord was speaking in parables, which were difficult to understand; the Lord was playing with him. Ai Luang, who would not touch a hair of the Great Master's head. Perhaps the Lord would explain.

Hinton proceeded to do so. "In the Great City, in Bangkok," he said quietly, "lives the Big Man of my great company. He is a very, very big man, so much so that he is friends with the King. Every evening they have meat and rice together."

"Wooi!" exclaimed Ai Luang, awe-struck at mention of the King of Siam.

"If," continued Hinton, "my Big Man hears that his company's money has been stolen near Ban Onn, he tell the King. The King will send up soldiers, many soldiers, to Ban Onn, and suspicion will fall upon Ai Luang, for is he not headman of the district? Then they take Ai Luang to the Great City, where he have to give evidence. He spend many moons in prison there, *even if he not found guilty.*"

Hinton paused, and Ai Luang spat deftly onto a sensitive plant nearby, but his hams quivered ever so slightly.

"The talk is finished," said Hinton suddenly.

"It is finished?" queried Ai Luang in surprise.

The white man nodded and, turning his back on the ancient, picked up a six-weeks' old newspaper. The interview was at an end.

BACK in the attap-roofed shanty that served Ai Luang for a home, the headman cracked a betel nut and sank into profound meditation. The brief interview with the Lord Hinton had shaken him more than he cared to admit, and, now he came to think upon the matter, these white lords were, indeed, exceedingly powerful and to meddle in their affairs was courting danger.

Still, it was a pity not to go through with the plot he had hatched, for the coup had been so nicely arranged for this very night. He had met the robbers secretly, and for his help he was to receive one of the boxes as commission, which wouldn't be so bad, as from their reported size he was certain they held at least two thousand ticals apiece.

And his part in the affair was so simple. All he had to do was to arrange that when the Lord Hinton's camp followers should visit his village in the cool of the evening, they would be provided with free rice spirit. They would then, he knew, drink until none of them could stand, and sleep the rest of the night amidst the market stalls. Thus would the white man's camp be unguarded, save for his cook and boy, and these could easily be overpowered should they give the alarm.

True, there was the little matter of insuring that the Lord Hinton should sleep well during the night, but after that all would be easy.

For a long while Ai Luang sat thus with his thoughts, and not until the sun began to lower did he come to a decision, when he acted quickly. First, he ordered the largest, freshest, and most juicy coconut in the village to be brought him. Having whittled off the thick fiber that surrounded the shell, he cunningly pierced a hole in one end of the nut and, without allowing any of the fluid to escape, blew, with the aid of a thin bamboo pipe, a quantity of fine white powder into the milk. He then closed up the hole with great care, so that no one should know the shell had been tampered with, after which he summoned his eldest son.

"Here is a coconut," wheezed Ai Luang, when the latter had appeared.

His son agreed with him.

"This coconut, together with some bananas and eggs, thou shalt take to the Lord Hinton after he has had his evening meal. Thou shalt say that Ai Luang sends gifts, and hopes that the Lord is well. Thou shalt further say that the night is hot, and that this coconut is the best coconut in all the country. Wherefore is its milk cool and pleasant to the taste, especially since the night is hot. Does my son understand?"

"He understands."

"Then go."

The son, a strapping, full-blooded swarthy Lao, disappeared, and shortly after another visitor slunk into Ai Luang's home. The newcomer was the chief of the robber gang, and with him the old man held much earnest converse.

AN HOUR after dawn Hinton awoke. He stretched his arms, which ached unaccustomedly, as if he had toiled much the previous evening, and then he slid through his mosquito-net onto the ground, after which he glanced under the bed, to find that the space there was empty, and that not one box remained out of the ten.

He dressed hurriedly, then swung out into the clearing. As he did so the figures of some of his coolies and mahouts came slinking back to camp from the direction of Ban Onn, and one glance at them assured Hinton that their heads were sore and their throats extremely parched. He ignored them, however, and began striding up the path that led to the village. When halfway there a Lao, whom he recognized as one of Ai Luang's sons, came hurrying towards him.

"The Lord is awake?" asked the man, somewhat unnecessarily.

"Very much awake," snapped Hinton. "Take me to thy father."

Five minutes later the white man climbed up the rickety bamboo ladder leading to the shanty, brushed aside the dried rushes that guarded the entrance, and stepped inside.

Squatting in a circle on the cane flooring were six figures, five of whom were securely bound with creeper. In the center of the circle were ten wooden boxes, entirely intact.

"The Lord has slept well?" inquired the sixth figure, who was Ai Luang.

"Not well, not bad," answered Hinton. "Would Ai Luang kindly explain?"

"Master," began the old man, "soon after midnight I dreamed a dream. I dreamed that the White Lord's boxes were in danger. I waked from this dream, and I send my sons and my strongest villagers quick to your camp. On the way they see five robbers, their arms heavy with two boxes each, going through the jungle. They catch them and bring them to me. I keep them here."

"And Ai Luang did not send to tell me?" asked Hinton, speaking in tones that were different to his wont. The old, quick decision in his voice was lacking, and his mien was almost servile as he addressed the old native.

"Master, I send one son back to the Lord's tent, where he listen. Then he return, saying the Lord still sleep. So I think I better not wake the Lord, for he wish to rest and the money safe anyhow. It is good?"

"It is good," said Hinton brokenly, after a pause. "How can I ever repay Ai Luang? Of a truth, he is all-wise and all-powerful."

Though the headman's face remained a black, wrinkled mask, he grinned inwardly. These white lords: they were fools after all, monkeys even! The talk about them had been child's talk and they were no more to be feared than a chicken that has just broken the shell. However! He cleared his throat and was about to speak again when a restless movement came from one of the bound robbers, whereupon Ai Luang turned his head and gave the man one glance.

Now the glance was outwardly one of benign tranquillity, but apparently the robber thought otherwise, for he froze again into immobility and his sullen eyes sought the floor. He and his four friends had been betrayed by Ai Luang, but, though his soul was seething in righteous anger, he knew well that Ai Luang would provide his escort for the journey to the distant gendarmerie station, and on the way accidents might happen, especially if he endeavoured to enlighten the white man with regard to certain happenings the previous night. Prison, therefore, being preferable to an accident occurring on the way to it, the robber maintained a gloomy silence, and eventually Ai Luang, having transferred his gaze to John Hinton, spoke again.

"The Lord will give me a reward? Have I not saved him much money?"

The white man pointed to the largest of the boxes that lay on the floor. "For thy great services, half the contents of that box shall be thine, Ai Luang."

The old man's eyes flashed greedily, for here was good business indeed. One thousand ticals at least, not to speak of the extra two hundred and fifty he would be given as a reward for capturing the robbers, was a sum which well-nigh staggered the imagination. And, he reflected, he had gained this amount at no risk to his own well being or safety and, save for a small expenditure on free rice toddy, at no cost to his pocket. One thousand two hundred and fifty ticals! Visions surrounded him; four new wives, perhaps five; eight new pairs of trousers; a teak-built house, with a real tin roof on; a large music-box (he meant a gramaphone); buffaloes, bullocks and chickens without end; fish curry, not once a week, but every day and at every meal; possibly even . . .

The voice of John Hinton interrupted his rosy dreams.

"Since Ai Luang is so wise and so powerful, could not he have another dream?" the white man was pleading. "A dream about the saddle. It was a very good saddle, and if it could be found the other half of the box is Ai Luang's also."

The headman shifted on his hams and purred mentally. He also swelled visibly, for the normal masterfulness of the Lord Hinton had broken down, and the great white man was bowing to him, a native. *Two* thousand two hundred and fifty ticals! Eight new wives now instead of four; a small elephant of his very own; instead of fish curry—no, he couldn't think of anything better than fish curry, which was a pity; still . . . with an effort he brushed aside dreams of the future and rose to his feet.

"It may be done," he said to Hinton, omitting the word "Lord." "I go see smoke dreams."

He vanished into an adjoining partition where, highly pleased with his own importance, he left John Hinton for one whole hour alone with the robbers. At the end of this time he returned to the first compartment, where he found the white man waiting in absolute humility for his reappearance.

"Ai Luang has had a dream?" asked Hinton in an anxious voice.

"He has," replied the other importantly. "I see man who stole the saddle, and I go find him."

This time the headman climbed down the bamboo ladder and walked into the village market place, where he remained one more hour before he retrieved the saddle from the spot where he had hidden it. By noon he was back in the shanty again and handing the stolen property to its rightful owner.

"Here is the saddle," he wheezed, being somewhat out of breath. "I find it after much trouble, and the thief I have punished. It is well?"

"It is well," said Hinton brokenly. Then the white man stooped and with his own hands lifted the largest and heaviest of the boxes, which he placed at Ai Luang's feet.

The old man's eyes glinted with mingled greed and excitement, and, seizing his jungle knife, he eagerly pried open the lid. Inside the box, firmly embedded between large stones, was an enormous coconut.

"WHAT—what is the meaning of this?" stuttered Ai Luang, after a pause that spoke for itself.

"What is the meaning of this, *Lord!*" thundered Hinton.

"Lord," quavered Ai Luang.

John Hinton rose to his full height and towered above the ancient. "The meaning," he cried, and his voice now cracked like the lash of a whip, "the meaning is that thou art a fool as well as a knave. Open all the other boxes, dog!"

Though the bowels melted within him and his hands trembled like teak leaves in the wind, the old man hastily complied, and when he had finished he stared in dumb amazement at nine more boxes filled to the brim with round, dry, shining stones.

"So," said Hinton eventually, "justice is even. I have back my saddle, and thou wilt have two hundred and fifty ticals in payment for much rice toddy expended and the trouble of escorting the robbers to the nearest gendarmerie station. It is good?"

"It is good, Lord," quavered Ai Luang. "The Lord is beyond the understanding of such a one as me."

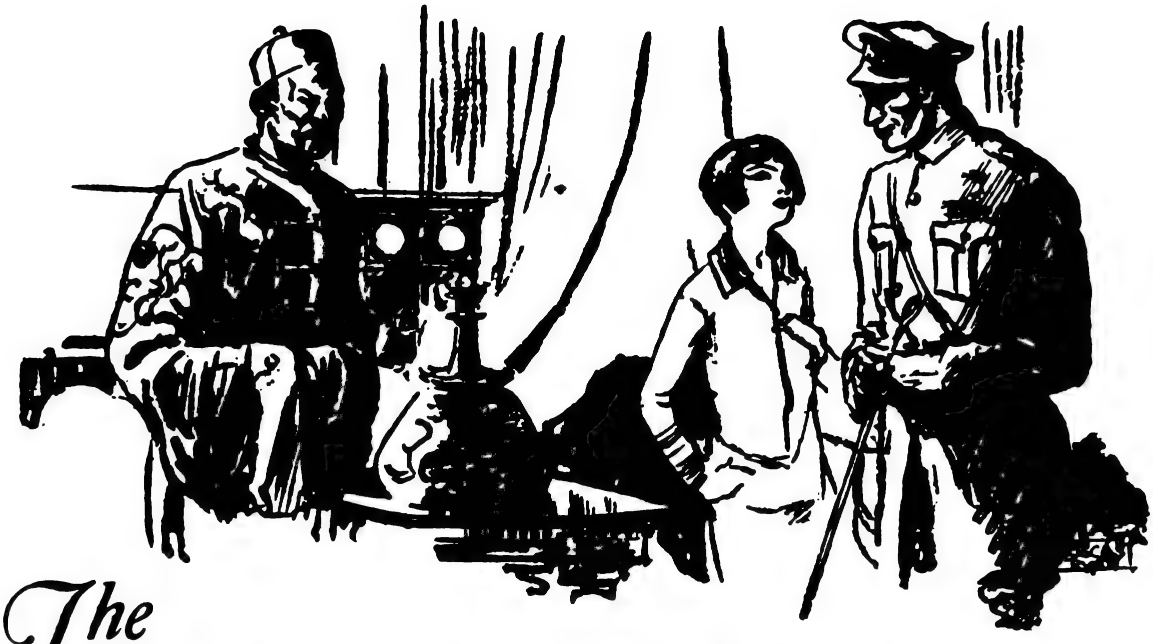
"The Lord is tired now," remarked Hinton, yawning. "He not sleep till *late* last night, for he wait and listen till certain visitors come and go. Now he return to camp. Meanwhile Ai Luang is to take out the stones and bring the empty boxes back to the tent."

Without another word Hinton walked out into the sunshine. Ten minutes later he was entering his tent, behind which ran the dry watercourse dotted with round, shining stones. Yes, the drought had helped him in his dilemma.

He yawned again, then stretched his arms. They still ached with the toil he had performed when, after the arrival of the coconut the previous evening, he had with great haste taken the silver out of all the boxes and buried it in the earth below his ground-sheet.

Not for nothing had John Hinton suspected that Ai Luang might double-cross both him and the thieves.

Another story of the teak forest, "The Shikari," will appear in the April issue.



The Slant Eyed Flapper

General Joe Thompson of the Chinese Armies and an Adventure in Shanghai

By L. G. BLOCHMAN

IF CONSPIRATORS as a professional group believe in the efficacy of prayer, there must be hundreds of invocations arising daily in twenty languages to thank the many deities charged with the celestial surveillance of the cosmopolis of Shanghai for the beneficent fact that the French concession has remained apart from the international settlement. The freedom of French Town from the joint control which keeps some sort of check on international adventuring in the settlement has made that part of Shanghai a haven for political refugees of all nationalities and an incubator for international plots of all extents. Beneath the European atmosphere created by street names, stern brick-front foreign mansions, and the tennis courts of elegant clubs, there runs an undercurrent of intrigue more oriental than the stench of the native city of Shanghai itself.

Joe Thompson knew of the reputation of French Town. Otherwise he might have been surprised to find that the address in the Rue Machin telegraphed him by General Liao was the office of a firm designated by a bi-lingual sign as the *Société pour l'Exportation du Camphre.* The dingy little room on the ground floor tried to be authentic through an odor of moth-balls, and the pidgin French of a drowsy Annamite clerk with an oversized white collar who sat behind a much-cluttered desk. The clerk ushered Thompson into a still dingier room behind and backed out, leaving him in the presence of a well-combed, well-collared, well-mannered Chinese in faultless dove-gray English suit, and a heavily jowled European whose egg-shaped head was covered with colorless fuzz.

"Howdy!" said the newcomer, as the two men remained seated and expectantly silent. It was obvious that he was a stranger to them. "General Liao wired me to come down from Ping-Chow to meet him here. He has some new deal on. I'm General Thompson."

"Yes, of course," said the Chinese in English that was a bit throaty and slurred the R's. A mission college graduate, thought Thompson. "Of course. You are the American sergeant that Liao promoted to be brigadier-general. Of course. How would you like to be an admiral for a change? He should make a pretty good one, shouldn't he, Captain. Oh, pardon me. Meet Captain Schultz."

"Bleased to met you," said the man with the egg-shaped head, extending an enormous hand from the soiled cuffs of a rumpled white duck suit.

"Where's the boss?" asked Thompson. "I was to meet him here."

"General Liao is—he had to leave Shanghai suddenly," said the Chinese. "But he has given me full instructions. My name is Yee. Sit down and let me tell you about it."

Thompson removed a straw hat with a black and white band from a brush of persimmon-colored hair, sat down deliberately, and swung a broad-toed yellow shoe over the knee of a carefully pressed pongee suit. He glanced about the room quickly. One wall was nearly covered by a map of Formosa, another contained a shipping company's calendar and a picture of a camphor tree, and the other two were bisected by doors. There was not a window in the place, and an old carbon-filament light gave out a half-hearted glow. Thompson thought for a moment that he detected the acrid smell of opium.

"What's the game?" he inquired.

"First I must tell you that General Liao is retiring from civil war to take up revolution," said Yee. "He has been approached by Chinese patriots of Formosa who wish to free that island from Japanese domination. The world does not know how we Formosans have suffered from the oppression of the ruling minority." Yee sighed noisily. "But they will know when we regain our liberty. General Liao is arranging the rising."

"And am I to be the yeast?" Thompson broke in.

"I am coming to that. Of course the Chinese of Formosa will be our mainstay. We have only to arm them and put them into skeleton units of trained men whom we will quietly transport from the mainland. You—ah—will secretly drill the revolutionists, after having superintended the transport of arms. But there is one obstacle to be overcome before we begin. The cost——"

"By golly," interrupted Thompson, "if anything ever happened to the banking system of China, a great wave of pacifism would sweep the country."

"Ah, but money is one of the sinews of war," said Yee.

"You pet," echoed Captain Schultz, who was filling a meerschaum pipe as big as a door knob.

"As you may well imagine," continued Yee, "the transport of arms without detection by the Japanese will be a great problem. Fortunately Captain Schultz, through former comrades in the German Navy, has been able to secure for us a submarine that should have gone to the Allies under the Versailles Treaty. The submarine is now in hiding in a cove of one of the numerous islands off the Fukien coast. It is ours as soon as we produce one million Haikwan taels."

"I haven't got 'em," said Thompson decisively.

"We have the money practically promised. An exceedingly rich old man by the name of Chong who was forced to leave Formosa soon after the Japanese occupation has intimated that he will finance the revolution. Chong, by the way, lives out of reach of the Japanese in this very building. His apartments can be reached only through this room."

"Through that door behind you?" asked Thompson.

"No, no," replied Yee quickly. "Through a door that is concealed by that large map. See? Like this."

"And that other door?" asked Thompson with the air of a man always looking for a rear exit.

"It is nothing," said Yee with exaggerated unconcern. "It is an old storeroom, full of—shoes and things."

"And when does John D. Chong put up the cash to buy the sub?"

"I am coming to that. Chong is very old. He has not much longer to live, surely. But he has a son who went to America twenty-five years ago, and who is coming from San Francisco to see his father before he dies. The son, we are afraid, may object to any of his father's fortune going to the cause of human liberty. Sons are often like that. And Chong Junior arrives today. I intercepted the message. He was not due until tomorrow, but we have just been informed that the *President Jefferson* drops anchor at Woosung this afternoon. This rather upsets our plans, as we have a French *notaire* coming to put the old man's promise in legal form. Therefore I am going to ask you to delay the son's arrival until we have the matter arranged."

"Does Liao know about this?" inquired Thompson.

"Certainly," was the reply. "In fact, it is his idea. You will go down to Woosung on the tender which leaves in half an hour, meet the younger Chong on board the steamer, and escort him back to Shanghai. I will have an auto awaiting you at the dock. Here is the license number. The chauffeur will drive you to a hotel whose proprietor knows what to do. He will show Chong to a room of which the key will be immediately lost. It will be found again as soon as the old man underwrites our revolution. When the key is lost, you will return here. Can do?"

"Can do," Thompson assented.

II

THE *President Jefferson* floated motionless on the yellow swirl that marked the juncture of the bister Whangpoo and the khaki expanse of the Yangtze. The quarantine flag was down and the port formalities were being fulfilled over a square bottle in the captain's cabin. Joe Thompson was being escorted down an interminable corridor by a white-coated steward who indicated the cabin of Chong Junior. A knock, and the door was opened by a Chinese whose wrinkled face indicated he was well past fifty. Chong stared through gold-rimmed spectacles to size up the red-headed stranger from his white socks to his striped-silk collar.

"Mr. Chong," said Thompson, "your folks sent me to meet you. The old man ain't so bright today, so they didn't want to leave him. I'll see that you get up to his place all right."

"Awlight, I come pitty quick," said Chong Junior, who had preserved his Chinese dress and pidgin English through twenty-five years of American residence. "Befo' must get dawta."

"*Your* daughter. Mr. Chong?" inquired Thompson with ill-concealed surprise.

"Yeh, my dawta. Fine gel. Cabin this side. I call. Annie May Chong!"

The door across the passage opened, disclosing to Thompson a perfect specimen of Americanized second generation. Annie May Chong was fairly tall and well proportioned, a fact not concealed by a filmy light blue dress which in addition hid little of a well-filled pair of silk stockings. Her thick, blue-black hair was undeniably Chinese, but it was bobbed with a point curving well onto each delicately rouged cheek. The sauciness of her mouth was also cosmetically accentuated, and the tortoise-shell rims of her glasses and her remodeled eyebrows took away something of the oriental cast of her eyes. There was complete emancipation in the gesture with which she extended her shapely hand to Thompson.

And there was more embarrassment than mere shyness in Thompson's return of the greeting. The idea of a woman being mixed up in his affairs gave him stage fright. He did not like the idea of the joy of adventure being tempered with having to give heed to any chivalrous considerations.

Long after the tender had pulled away from the ship's side and was bound up the river for Shanghai, Thompson was silent. He was puzzled over what to do with the girl who had walked unannounced into the picture. His silence was quite covered, however, by the continuous conversation of Annie May Chong, as garrulous as any thoroughbred flapper.

"This is my first peek at China," she informed him. "I was born in 'Frisco, but I've been traveling all over creation for the last few years. Circuses and vaudeville since I was sixteen. Maybe you've seen our act. Hip Ling Foo's Chinese acrobats, booked two years solid over Keith's time. Funny you never saw us. My dad hasn't either, but then he's old fashioned. Oh, you haven't been home for five years? Where's your home? St. Louis? I traveled for a while with an act from St. Louis. That is, she was from St. Louis. I think he was a foreigner. That was when I was first beginning, and I don't remember much any more. They used to fight all the time, and finally he killed her and skipped the country. I don't think they ever caught him. You don't happen to know her, being from St. Louis? You see funny things in the show business. Gee, isn't this river dirty? Have we got much further to go? I can see factory chimneys already. This country sure is flat. You can hardly see the banks, they're so low. And aren't those boats just killing, with their eyes painted on the front."

On the whole, the land of her ancestors was not making much of a hit with Annie May Chong. She looked with disgusted astonishment at the fleet of sampan women now hovering about the tender—withered old hags, sculling flat little boats filled with dirty children, fishing out sodden hunks of bread or a cabbage leaf or two that floated by on the muddy river.

It was during the customs examination that Thompson decided that his code of ethics would not permit him to lock up the girl with her father. Thus when the car stopped in front of the doubtful-looking hotel which Yee had indicated, he turned to Annie May to say:

"Will you wait just a minute, Miss Chong? I'm taking your dad in here for a jiffy, and we'll be right out."

When he came back alone and gave another address to the chauffeur, the girl slid up to the edge of the seat and gave him a look that would scratch glass.

"What's the big idea?" she demanded. "Where's my old man?"

"We'll see him later," said Thompson, looking the other way. "He told me to get you a room in a good hotel."

"He didn't do anything of the kind," said Annie May Chong, in a voice that was figuratively coiling itself to strike. "Say, are you trying to get fresh with an innocent working girl alone in the strange and wicked city?"

"I ain't that talented," replied Thompson, blushing slightly. "Listen. If you do as I tell you I won't even so much as touch the tips of your highly polished fingernails. What I'm trying to do is to ease you out of a trap that was set before we knew you were stalking about in the woods. Now your dad——"

"What are you going to do to the old man?" she asked with a startled look in her eyes.

"He won't be hurt," Thompson assured her. "You see, it's like this . . . Say, I don't know why an old soldier like me should be telling state secrets to a woman he never saw before."

"You aren't old," said Annie May with a look that made Thompson blush again. "And you can trust me. I'll do whatever you say. Sure I will, 'cause you got an honest look in your blue eyes. Here, shake on it."

Thompson found her hand particularly soft for a lady acrobat.

"Well," he said, "it's just that your grandad is planning a little revolution with us. It's dangerous business, the start of it, so we're just keeping your dad out of it for the moment."

"Thanks," said the girl. "Revolutions are really out of date and I'm glad the old man is being kept out. But what are you doing in it?"

"It's my business," said Thompson. "Anything that moves fast is my business. I quit the 15th U. S. Infantry in Tientsin because making out the fatigue roster every day was too slow. And now if you'll just stay quietly in this hotel until I come and get you——"

"Don't make it too long," said Annie May Chong. "I want to get out and see the town."

III

WHEN Thompson returned to Rue Machin, Yee was alone—alone with the ghost of a smell which Thompson thought before to be opium.

"There's a dragon fly in our ointment," said Thompson, dismissing the smell of opium as merely an indication of some neighbor's recreation hour. "Chong's got a daughter with him."

"A daughter?" said Yee with a rising inflection.

"And a darned cute kid," added Thompson.

"Did you lock her up, too?"

"I don't like treating women rough," said Thompson, "so I took her to the Great Eastern and got her a room."

Yee smiled a smile which seemed to say, "Aren't you a little rascal, now." Then he said:

"You can keep her there for a while. Our trick is working out rather slowly."

"No luck?"

"Of sorts. The old man will probably buy us our submarine while the occasion offers, but for the rest of the revolution we must depend on a clause in his will which favorably mentions the Friends of Formosa."

"Then there is nothing to do but wait?"

"Ah, yes there is," said Yee with a little laugh. "Old man Chong is old and feeble. It would surprise no one if he were to join his ancestors at an early date. Now, he has a cook who is an affable fellow and appreciates the value of money. I think he will —ah—listen to reason."

Thompson looked about the room silently, then started rolling a cigaret. His failure to reply caused Yee to stand up.

"I understand your silent question," said Yee, putting his hands into his coat pockets and cocking his head slightly to one side. "Of course you will have your—ah—commission. There will be plenty for all of us."

Thompson finished rolling his cigaret and lit it before he finally said, "Mister Yee, I am a soldier and I have killed men. But I am not a cold-blooded murderer. You can count me out."

"A revolution always costs lives," said Yee, "as sacrifices to the cause of humanity."

"Poisoning an old man for his mazooma," insisted Thompson, puffing out smoke like a switch engine on a siding, "is just plain murder, and I refuse."

"You can't," said Yee imperiously. "You're an accomplice before the fact. You've waylaid the old man's son. It's too late to back out now."

"I'm a pretty good backer," said Thompson, "and I got three speeds in reverse. When's Liao coming back?"

"Why don't you find out? That will give you a way of killing time. You aren't afraid of killing time, are you, with all your tender heart? But I forgot. Of course you have other distractions this afternoon."

Yee smiled knowingly, and Thompson slammed the door as he left without replying.

As a lank, long-legged ricksha coolie who has been promised an extra *cumshaw* can outdistance half the cab horses in Shanghai, Thompson disregarded the beckoning whip of a coachman whose flat white conical hat was decorated with a blue fringe. He chose a two-legged steed who must have cut six months off his life by what sport writers call a gruelling grind and a heart-breaking sprint. Thompson found he went rather slowly.

Annie May Chong was waiting in the lobby of the Great Eastern.

"I didn't think you'd mind if I just came down here," she said. "I can watch the people, and I'd be sure to see you when you came in. Are we going? Oh, let's take one of those funny carriages. Does it really take two men to drive them?"

"Hop in," said Thompson, "I got important things to tell you about."

Annie May Chong had her own scale of importance. Right now there was nothing more important than the aspect of Nanking Road in the amber dusk of a summer evening. Dah Mah Loo, as the Chinese call it—"the Great Horse Road"—is Shanghai's Broadway. A stream of electric cars, autos, carriages and rickshas was flowing between tall buildings. Electric signs were flashing their advertising message in blazing ideographs. Wax mannequins postured behind the plate glass of modern show windows. Gaudy lithographs proclaimed the thrills of a serial motion picture. Only the open-front native shops, the slow-moving crowds of white-clad Chinese out for a breath of evening air, and the indescribable suggestive odor of the Orient, neither pleasant nor unpleasant, which hung on the atmosphere, were reminders that the locale about them was not occidental.

"Isn't this marvelous!" exclaimed Annie May, ignoring Thompson's nervous anxiety to speak. "I never imagined China would be like this."

"It ain't," Thompson replied. "This is just China dressed up in foreign clothes. The real thing is underneath. You'll meet some people like that—in a few minutes, I guess. A celluloid collar and a razor edge on a fellow's trousers may not change his horoscope or his psychoanalysis, but they fool a lot of people. Say, can you cook?"

"Are you proposing to me? My, don't you work fast! Well, I can make corned beef hash and boil eggs."

"Can you cook stuff like your grandpaw's liable to eat, like *fun-tszu* and *yen-kwa*, and mutton with mushrooms and bamboo sprouts?"

"You don't think I came to Shanghai to cook for my grandfather, do you? Me, the star trapeze artist of Hip Ling Foo's Chinese acrobats? Guess again."

"You don't give me a chance to tell my story," said Thompson. "It looks as though there was about to be murder in your family."

The girl was so startled she didn't say a word.

Then Thompson told of the turn of events which the pre-revolution events were taking, and how he had declared to Yee that he wished to keep red spots off his conscience, yet how he was already involved to such an extent that it was difficult for him to call outside help to prevent the poisoning of Millionaire Chong.

"So it looks like it's your say, with a pat hand against you," he concluded. "I'm going to push you right into the middle of the party. We'll bust up to the old man's place."

"All right, Red—do you mind if I call you 'Red'?—I'll do my best," said Annie May Chong. She was serious now.

Yee was expecting them. While Thompson was off to get the girl, Yee had released her father, with whom he was waiting when Thompson and Annie May emerged from the narrow staircase that led from the dummy offices to the elder Chong's rooms.

"Is this the scoundrel who so basely locked you up?" inquired Yee of the younger Chong in as honeyed tones as the Chinese language permits.

The San Francisco Chong grunted assent.

"I humbly beg of you ten thousand pardons," said Yee servilely. "I sent him to meet you because I thought I could trust him. Of course I did not know that your lovely daughter accompanied you. Had I known, I should have taken more precautions. I realize how great a treasure is a young girl. So does this foreign rascal, for it was obviously to loot her charms that he so treacherously imprisoned you. Luckily I was able to learn the truth from the chauffeur who returned to report to me after taking the pair to a hotel."

"A lie, my august father," said Annie May Chong in Chinese. "I know not this person, but his lips speak falsehoods. I can tell you otherwise."

"Do not!" commanded a thin, high-pitched, but authoritative voice from a dark corner of the room.

It was the elder Chong, reclining on a richly embroidered square of blue silk, thrown over a brilliantly nickeled bedstead. Aside from a silver-brocaded canopy over the bed, the nickeled bedstead set the gaudy note of the room: mirrors, bright brass urns, an immense landscape in which impossibly steep mountains, curly-roofed pagodas, and sprays of willow leaves were portrayed in scarlet, vivid greens, and blue grays.

"Does not my august father wish to hear the truth?" repeated the girl.

"Do not!" said the elder Chong, passing a withered hand over his bald head and screwing up his shriveled face the better to peer at his granddaughter through square-rimmed spectacles. "Does a female descendant of Chong Chu-Pao thus disrespectfully contradict an elder under the family roof? What is this brazen, immodest, irreverent creature thou has brought home to me, my son?"

"What's the row?" inquired Thompson of Annie May. "This lingo kinda gets me down."

"They're putting up a job on you, Red; you better skip," she said quickly.

"Skip nothing," replied Thompson. "It looks to me, without a complete mastery of the Confucian classics, that they're opening up on you before you've even had a chance to kiss your grandpaw hello. I think I better stay and keep an eye on my friend Yee."

"If an unworthy stranger such as your humble servant may offer his valueless advice," continued Yee in Chinese to the two male Chongs, "I would point out that the foreigner has by some oversight been too closely connected with the preliminaries of our movement for Formosan freedom, which I have just hurriedly sketched to your noble son. In short, he knows too much. He has betrayed my trust in the simple matter of escorting your son from the boat. Will he not betray us in the more important matters to come? May he not be, in fact, an agent of Japan, sent against us?"

"Wisely spoken," declared the younger Chong, glaring at the red-headed American.

"We must protect ourselves," squeaked the elder Chong, raising himself on an elbow and tapping a tiny gong which was suspended from a stand on a table near his bed.

"Beat it!" said Annie May Chong to Thompson, as two giant servants slid noiselessly into the room through parted curtains.

"What's up?" asked Thompson.

"Beat it quick!" she repeated as the old man gave curt instructions.

It was too late. They were from the north, these giants, where a wheat diet and cold winters breed large bones and muscles in proportion. Thompson's fist smacked into the expressionless face of the first giant who reached for him, but the second pulled his feet out from under him with a quick, neat, jerk. Before he had time to bounce or swear, Thompson was firmly enlaced by four Manchu arms, and was being carried from the room head first. He turned for a last glance at Annie May Chong. The girl said nothing, but her eyes seemed to repeat what she had said to him an hour earlier: "I'll do my best."

"Now for this denatured, foreign-looking child," said the elder Chong, tapping his gong twice. To the wizened old woman in black jacket and trousers who responded, he said, "Take this misguided relative and wash from her all signs of immodesty. Cloth her naked limbs in decent trousers and coat. Speak to her of respect and the Confucian virtues. Make her worthy of us, for she is of our blood."

"Who is this woman?" asked Annie May tartly.

"Your revered grandfather's Number Three wife," replied Yee obsequiously.

The girl from San Francisco looked from one face to another, appraising the expressions: the choleric mask of impotent dignity of her grandfather; the passivity of her father, showing no trace of years of exposure to a different civilization; the scheming servility of Yee, sickeningly suave; and the complete extinction of personality in the Number Three wife. Annie May Chong lowered her eyes. The defiant curl disappeared from her lips. She bowed with a subdued air.

"How right is my venerable forebear," she said. "How wrong have I been to flaunt alien manners before him. Accept that I make amends. I go now to clothe myself in the manner of true modesty, as is befitting one of our blood."

She hesitated a moment, then continued, "And this fire-haired alien?"

"He is not indifferent to thee?" inquired her father.

"I despise him," she replied, with the spirit of Hip Ling Foo's star acrobat, rather than the model of filial meekness. Then she resumed her rôle with a quiet, "He will be punished?"

"The Whangpoo runs deep and nights are dark," said Yee.

"Since I have been in part victim of his wrong," ventured Annie May, "may I not participate in inflicting the punishment?"

"That is not a woman's work," said the elder Chong. "We must torture him. If he be a Japanese agent, we must learn his secrets before he dies."

"Woman knows how to be cruel," suggested the girl. "Permit that I invent suffering."

"We will see," said the elder Chong. "Tomorrow will be time enough. For the moment he is safe in the guest room above. One window and that barred. He will not grow fat, our guest of the red hair. You may retire."

"And I as well," added Yee. "I have matters to arrange. I will return tomorrow with the man of the submarine, that we may advance our campaign."

IV

JOE THOMPSON thought he would enjoy a good, virulent case of smallpox about as much as being locked up in a bare six-by-eight room. He had certainly got more fun in being shot off a roof in Ping-Chow a few weeks back. He wasn't physically uncomfortable—he was used to the damp heat of the Yangtze Valley summer—but he somehow felt that he was in about the same predicament as an aged goat waiting philosophically to be made into lamb chops.

There was no glass but a grill over the little window by which, standing on his toes, he could look out over the choppy sea of tiled roofs which made up the native city, here and there catching a brown glimpse of the Whangpoo. He sat down on the floor and watched the checkered patch of blue sky turn to green gold, slate gray, and finally deep blue. God, he was hungry! He had missed his lunch to land Chong, and now he was going to fast all night. Perhaps it didn't matter. If they were going to boost him into the next world at one minute or another, he could go looking for his harp and halo just as well on an empty stomach as with indigestion. Just the same, he would like to be commissioned to probe a platter full of browned onions in quest of an inch-thick delmonico steak.

The grilled patch of sky was almost black now, and a few stars winked at him, flaunting their freedom before a captive. The very street noises were sounds of freedom: the tremolo song of itinerant restaurateurs, bean-curd venders, sellers of rice and *fun-tszu;* the shouts of ricksha pullers, and the distant howls of fighting dogs. Now came a strain of revelry: a Chinese fiddle squeaked out three notes in mournful repetition, with a two-toned cymbal crashing through the monotony. Now a singer began to wail, barely distinguishably. Although he knew he would not understand them, Thompson found himself straining his ears to catch the singer's words. He thought he detected the syllable "Red." "It must be hunger," he said to himself, "though I'd never have thought that missing two meals would make me hear things."

The musicians banged and squealed the final crescendo. The singer had stopped. But out of the darkness came the whisper: "Red." Thompson stood up. There was no doubt about it this time. He noted that the stars were blotted out of the little window.

"It's only me," said a silhouette which Thompson recognized.

"Where the—where did you come——"

A soft hand covered his mouth.

"Not so loud," whispered Annie May Chong. "I climbed up from my room below."

"You'll break your neck."

She sniffed.

"You don't play big time for two years solid and still do stupid things like that," said the girl acrobat. "Did they feed you?"

"No."

"I didn't think they would. Wait a minute. Here's some greasy Chinese cakes I bought in the street. They aren't exactly French pastries, but for the love of Pete don't leave any crumbs."

"Don't worry," Thompson assured her. "Do you?"

"Well— What are they going to do to me?"

"Nothing, if I can help it. But they got ambitious plans."

"It looks to me like their ambitions were going to succeed."

"How about the American consul?"

"This is the French concession," said Thompson pessimistically. "And anyhow the consul would be too busy getting up his report on the soy-bean crop."

"Then I'll do everything myself." She patted his cheek. "What should I do first?"

"Get me some tobacco."

"And then?"

"Listen. I'll give you the inside of the whole business."

"Keep it short. I'm hanging on by my eyebrows out here."

"Well, this bird Yee that started the stew tonight is only a super in this here revolution. He's got some Heinie by the name of Schultz who says he wants to sell the revolution a submarine. But the real guy is General Liao. He's my boss. If he was here this monkey business wouldn't have happened. Yee says he's outa town. Maybe he is and maybe he isn't. If he is, there's two men in Shanghai that'll know when he'll be back, and can hurry him if things look sloppy. They're Liao's secret agents here. One of 'em is number one boy in the *China Herald* office. The other one is a money-changer on the bund behind the Jap consulate. Get in touch with 'em as soon as you can, and let 'em tell my fortune for you."

"I will, Red," came the reply. "I'll do my darnedest."

She patted his cheek again, and then her silhouetted head slid from sight.

THOMPSON heard from her a few hours after it was light again. A package of cigarets and a box of matches wrapped together came hurtling through the bars of his window. As he slid open the match box to light his first cigaret, a bit of paper as big as a postage stamp fluttered to the floor. On it was written in a cramped hand:

I'm doing my darnedest.

That was all, as long as it was daylight. No one came into the cell, and he was again left without food. The hours dragged on. Thompson paced his limited floor, three steps to the diagonal, and swore to himself. Then he sat down in a corner. One is apt to do little walking on half a dozen sesamum-seed cakes.

He dozed, perspired, smoked, and whistled. He gave scarcely a thought to the fact that the man who had proposed poisoning old man Chong would certainly not stop at quietly murdering a red-headed adventurer with a tendency to block well-laid plans for robbery. Often before in his filibustering career he had faced death; that was one of the joys of the profession. There was time enough to think about it when he had to. A darned good kid that slant-eyed flapper to go climbing around for him like that. She didn't have to; he hadn't done much for her. A darned good kid, and he liked her.

He watched his framed bit of sky change color again as the day grew slowly older. With the night came the smell of strange frying. Then the orchestra began to clang and cry. Finally, when the cubicle was quite dark, there came the whispered "Red!" that he was awaiting. He approached the window.

"Eat this, Red," were the first words of the star trapeze artist of Hip Ling Foo's acrobats. "I dug up a place where they sell ham sandwiches. Eat. You'll need your strength."

"Is it all up?" asked Thompson, with his mouth full of bread.

"Not quite," replied Annie May Chong, "but they figure on ringing down the curtain on you tonight. Are you afraid of death?"

"I never met the old gentleman," said Thompson, biting into another sandwich, "although we been neighbors frequently. I never looked him up. I think dying ain't half so bad as preparing for it. Did you find out about Liao?"

"I saw the two gents you told me to," she said, "and both swear that Liao hasn't left Shanghai and wasn't expecting to."

"They ought to know," commented Thompson, "it wouldn't surprise me at all that this here Yee has been bunking me from the start."

"The money-changer on the bund said he saw Liao yesterday morning, and that he said he was on his way to French Town to meet his American chief-of-staff named General Thompson."

"That's me. But he hasn't showed up. Yee must have side-tracked him somewhere."

"I think he did," said the girl. "I'll tell you why. There was a big conference downstairs today. My dad, the old man, Yee and the funny-face that calls himself Captain Schultz. I sneaked in to hand around the tea—say, you ought to see me in my mid-Confucian outfit. The old gent had his abacus rattling like a pair of sixes, figuring out what the submarine was going to cost him. You know, I've seen that Fritz somewhere before. The last time his name probably wasn't Schultz, and he wasn't peddling submarines, but I can't for the life of me remember where it was. It might have been only in the front row of a theatre where I was doing my stuff. He's got a perfect first-row head on him. Anyway I've got a hunch that his submarine is floating on a brain wave that he's trying to turn into pocket money. So I whispered in the old man's ear that he ought to be able to get the sub cheaper than a million. I said I heard General Liao had one lined up for half the price, and that he'd better not pay anything until tomorrow when Liao'd be back. I whispered loud enough for Yee to hear me, and when I mentioned Liao, you should have seen him prick up his ears. He started to talk about getting rid of the red-headed foreign devil right away. While I was filling up the cups, I mentioned that as it would be bad business to have a body lying around the house, they ought to wait until night so they could take it out and throw it in the river."

"You're awful considerate," said Thompson dryly.

Fingers in the dark stroked his hair.

"It must seem kinda funny to hear me talk cold-blooded murder like this, but I needed the time. I even told them they ought to torture you for a while so you would tell your secrets."

"Sure they ought," said Thompson with a mirthless chuckle.

"I offered to help," continued the girl, "because I thought that way I'd get a chance to let you go. But Yee said he had things all arranged. Schultz would officiate, he said, because he was very good at torturing people. He wouldn't say any more. But they'll be up to get you pretty soon."

"Do you suppose I'll have time for a smoke, or had I better wait and see if I don't smoke for eternity?" asked Thompson.

"Say, are those cigarets I bought you doped? I thought I smelled opium when I was climbing up the side of the house.

Maybe it's just my old man, though. He likes to hit the pipe now and then."

"Nope, it's somebody downstairs. I noticed it in the phoney office yesterday before you arrived."

"Well, I'll have to crawl back now," said the girl. "Take this little gun and stick it in your jeans. It may not do any good, there being so many of them. I got another for myself, a little pearl-handled one. Try not to shoot any of my folks."

"Thanks," said Thompson, clearing his throat. "And good-by."

He pressed his lips to the fingers twined around one of the bars of his window.

"Oh, don't say good-by. I'll be there for the fireworks. I'll think up some last minute gag. I never was anything extra on the set pieces, Hip Ling Foo always told me, but once I get out on the trapeze, I'm pretty clever on the extempo stuff. Keep your chin up, Red."

She patted his cheek and disappeared.

Thompson finished his cigaret in the dark and threw the stub on the floor. He contemplated the glowing end for an instant, and thought he saw in it the black oriental eyes and saucy occidental mouth of Annie May Chong. Then he ground it under his heel.

"She's a good kid," he said to himself, "but if I was in the insurance business, I wouldn't write myself a policy right now. I look to me like a bad risk."

THERE was a rattling and rasping of Chinese padlocks outside the door. The two giant servants of the day before stood in the doorway, armed with globular paper lanterns and short clubs. Thompson reached for the gun Annie May Chong had just given him. "May as well have a little fun of my own out of this party," he said to himself.

But the giant whose face still bore marks of Thompson's previous existence was not to be caught off guard again. With a sudden swing he brought his club down on the top of the American's head, and Thompson's astral ego planed through planetary spaces, while his earthly being dropped to the floor. When the astral ego returned, the corporal counterpart was bound to the side of a loose door, arms outspread, and was being carried head downward through a narrow, winding staircase.

The giants set the door upright in a corner of the room in which Thompson had been made prisoner. Two huge lamps of brass fretwork hung from the ceiling and gave out yellow light in interlacing radiations. Thompson saw the elder Chong still reclining on his highly polished bedstead, puffing at a polished water pipe. In the opposite corner was a table around which sat the younger Chong, Yee, and Captain Schultz. Annie May Chong, in Chinese clothes, was pouring tea into brass-covered cups, frequently stealing a glance at a large suitcase which Schultz held between his knees. Yee called to the two giants as they moved to leave.

"Yah, dey better keeb hendy to garry avay de corbse," suggested Schultz.

Thompson's thin lips were pressed together in rage at being helplessly tied to the door. There were little puzzled lines on his forehead as he wondered just what sort of inquisition was being prepared for him. Perspiration stood on his freckled brow, not from emotion but because of the heat. It was suffocating in that room—one of those hot, sticky, July Shanghai nights which inspire pæans of joy from the mosquito hordes. Yee had removed his spotless collar, unbuttoned his vest, and unlaced his shoes. His polished occidental manner seemed to have vanished with the pomaded order of his now rumpled hair.

"All right, Captain," he said to Schultz.

The German slid the suitcase from between his knees with a jangling sound. He threw it open on the floor and an array of long, shining scimitars cast a cluster of restless reflections on the ceiling.

When Annie May Chong saw what the suitcase contained, she poured tea on Yee's lap and knocked a porcelain cup to the floor with a crash. Strange that a nervy kid like that should get excited at the sight of a bunch of knives, thought Thompson.

Schultz stood up with a grunt, picked up two of the heavy knives by their dull red handles, and weighed them thoughtfully in each of his hands.

"I must dry if still a goot eye I got," he said.

Then with a quick overhand motion he sent the blade flashing across the room. Thompson closed his eyes. The knife point thumped into the wood over his head and quivered for a few seconds. The lower edge of the blade was hidden in his bristling red hair.

The girl, who had been watching from the corner of her eye as she gathered up the bits of broken porcelain from the floor, rose suddenly. With a pert toss of her head she looked at Thompson, who was at a loss to understand the elated sparkle in her eyes. Then she went hurriedly from the room.

"Thompson," said Yee dramatically, "Captain Schultz has a steady hand, as you have seen. He also knows anatomy, and he has nineteen more knives. I warn you, so you may answer my questions accordingly."

"Save your breath," remarked Thompson. "Save it for more of your cantankerous lies."

A scimitar spun through the air and split the wood beside his left ear.

"You possess a sum of money as a result of your campaign with General Liao's troops at Ping-Chow," said Yee. "You have shown yourself unworthy of further trust, and must turn this money back. Where is it?"

"Ask Liao," came the brief reply.

Another knife vibrated between Thompson's knees, cutting into the flesh.

"Where is this money?" insisted Yee.

"Where's Liao?" countered Thompson.

The glitter of whirling steel and another knife struck the door under Thompson's armpit.

"Highbinder!" shouted Thompson.

"What does he say?" inquired the elder Chong from his bed.

"He confesses to be a Japanese agent, venerable one," lied Yee in Chinese, "but he refuses to name his confederates, against whom we must be on our guard. We continue our questions."

Schultz was enjoying outlining Thompson's body with knives. After each whir, flash, thud, and short vibration, he would criticize his aim.

"Ach, too low," he would murmur to himself. "My friend, you are loosing your old *kunst*."

THOMPSON'S gaze followed automatically every move of the German. He was as though hypnotized by the dazzle of the blades spinning toward him. His heart skipped a beat in spite of himself every time a point imbedded itself in the door, pinning part of his clothing and often nicking his flesh. What had happened to that slant-eyed flapper? he wondered. She went out in such a hurry that he had at first thought she had something up her wide embroidered sleeve. There were five knives left, now. Maybe she had gone for the French police. But no, that would ring in her family. No, she couldn't have any scheme. She must have gone because she saw the game was hopeless, and she didn't want to see the end. Four left. Well, she was right. Watching a guy get bumped off is no way for a girl to spend the evening. She did what she could. Three left, now.

"Hadn't you better finish him up?" asked Yee of the German. "He is only growing the more insolent."

"Mit der lest kunnife," he answered. "How should it be? Off mit der head, or a kunnife in der heart?"

"The surest way," said Yee nervously.

"Vait," said Schultz. "I got to put vun more by his hintern. So. Der lest I vill put ride betveen two rips."

"Have you anything more to say," Yee asked Thompson.

"I have," came the reply.

"Out with it."

"You can all go plumb to hell," said Thompson, raising his voice slightly.

"Those are your last words."

"I stick by 'em."

The twentieth scimitar gleamed in the German's hand. He stepped backward, his head lowered slightly to take aim.

Then the door from the stairway opened and Annie May Chong came in, somewhat out of breath.

"Captain Schultz," she said quickly, "your name isn't Hindlemann and you never lived in St. Louis, did you?"

The German lowered the knife, and he opened his mouth, but he merely swallowed.

"Because," continued the girl, "there's some men outside with extra-edition papers or something, who say they are looking for a Hindlemann who has been calling himself Schultz since he killed his wife in the dressing-room of a vaudeville theatre in Omaha."

"I am pizzy," the German gulped. "Don't let 'em in."

"They're in already," said the girl.

"They're in the stairway. But if you *are* Hindlemann, that window there is right near the roof of a little store, and maybe you——"

The German, as white as the fuzz on his head, kicked the glass from the window and was gone before anyone realized what he was doing.

"That's a lie," said Yee fiercely to Annie May Chong. "There's nobody in the stairway."

"Yes there is, dearie," said the girl, pulling open the door.

Yee seemed greatly upset at the sight of the little Chinese who stood there. He was not a dangerous-looking man in his rumpled gray trousers and pale blue tunic. His black hair was badly mussed, his face was wan, and his deep-sunk eyes glazed.

"Hello, General Liao," shouted Thompson as the little man stepped into the room.

But Liao paid no attention to anyone but Yee, whom he fixed with his haggard eyes. Then, without a word he drew a small pearl-handled revolver from his sleeve and fired twice.

Yee crumpled up, bleeding from the mouth.

"I am sorry to thus dishonor and defile your dwelling," said Liao to the elder Chong, "but I will have the débris removed immediately. Thief and traitor!"

Annie May Chong, who had picked up the twentieth knife dropped by Schultz-Hindlemann, cut down the crucified Thompson.

"You sure came through in the pinch," said Thompson, "and I can't ever thank you enough."

"Sure you can, Red," was the reply. "You can blow me to a feed and a cold bottle when you get a little rest and some adhesive tape to patch up your knife punctures."

"At seven-thirty tomorrow night at the Y. P. S. Hotel," said Thompson with a pleased grin.

"I'll be there," said Annie May Chong.

SHE was. And she let Thompson hold her hand while she told how she recognized Schultz-Hindlemann as the vaudeville knife-thrower who had killed his wife during a matinee, just in time for the late afternoon editions, and had then disappeared, leaving no traces.

"I couldn't think of his name," she said, "but I knew he used to take five minutes for his act, so I rushed to that kind of office downstairs to see if I couldn't find it on some papers or something he might have left around. I found a hat with an "H" in the sweatband, and it came back to me: Hindlemann. Then I noticed that smell of hop again. It was coming from that little door in the back of the office. I tried it; locked. Then I got a flash in my sometimes sluggish intellect, and I swung a chair and sprung the lock. There was the little guy stretched out on a cot, pretty much hopped up. There was a kid beside him that Yee must have installed to fill up his pipes and keep him under, but the last few hours the kid must have fell down on the job and had a few himself, 'cause he was dead to the world. 'I wonder if that could be Liao?' I said half out loud. The little guy turned his head. 'Sure, it must be,' I said. So I dragged him off the cot and shook him up a bit. 'There's a guy upstairs is stealing your revolution for his own private use,' I says to him. He didn't seem to get very enthused, so I slipped him the little gun I'd bought for myself and I says, 'His name is Yee, and he's fixing to carve up the best brick-topped general in your old army, wherever it is.' It was my pushing him up the stairs that finally woke him up."

"Listen, Annie May Chong," said Thompson, taking her other hand, "I admire you in more ways than one, as you probably have already figured out. I wish I could tell you all about it, but words just naturally knock each other back down my windpipe, fighting for the right of way. Anyhow, my experience with the female of the species has been strictly limited. But here's what has come into my mind since last night: a red-headed husband would put you in pretty bad with your living ancestors. My personal social standing would not be affected, because I got none. But if you really want to keep this chestnut you pulled outa the fire last night, why we could go off together to some place where we wouldn't be bothered by other people. I could get a job chasing river pirates in Szechuan, for instance."

The girl patted his hands and shook her head slowly.

"You're a good egg, Red, and I like you a lot," she said. "But I veto your proposition with thanks. There's three reasons. First, I think mixed breeds are a mistake. Second, I don't know exactly where Szechuan is, but it sounds a long way from the movies. And third, I don't think my fiancé would approve."

"Your fiancé?"

"Yep, I'm going to marry Hip Ling Foo, the best Chinese acrobat that ever played big time vaudeville. He's waiting for me in California. But listen. I got a counter proposition. Do you know that my grandad was so tickled over my saving him the investment in a pipe-dream submarine—it seems that Yee was holding some little blackmail scheme over him on the side—that he gave me ten per cent. of the amount bid to settle outstanding claims and liquidate the revolution. Ten per cent. makes 100,000 taels. Well, I settled by giving Liao 30,000 to start another war up in Mongolia somewhere. I think I'll take the rest back to 'Frisco and open an oriental curio store in upper Grant Avenue. Now, you know this country. Wouldn't you like to be my buyer out here? I'd give you a salary and commission."

Thompson, who had been making marbles out of a piece of bread while the girl was talking, piled his handiwork in a little pyramid on the tablecloth, and looked at his companion wistfully.

"Lady," he said, "I couldn't no more imagine Joe Thompson buying little jade snuffboxes and mandarin coats than Shackleton delivering ice. Women and curios ain't in my line, I guess. I suppose I'd better help out Liao with that new war he's going to start up in Mongolia."

Part Five of A Story of the Wildest Days on the Old Western Frontier

Preceding Events Briefly Retold.

In the year 1867 Lee Darby, a veteran of the Confederate Army, comes to Cheyenne, intent upon making his fortune. The frontier is a scene of wild disorders due to the approach of the Union Pacific Railroad.

In this wildest of the roaring railroad towns Darby has fallen in with Fevernager, an old plainsman, and Baltimore, his partner. The Indians had killed Baltimore's parents when he was an infant; and, adopting him, had raised him to manhood more Indian than white in mind and habit. Fevernager invites Darby to join him in the business of hunting buffalo to supply the railroad towns with meat. He hesitates, wishing to engage in something that will yield larger returns.

Darby also meets Allan Gorl, an Eastern capitalist who seeks adventure and new fortunes on the frontier. Darby feels that together he and Gorl could reap big profits. But Gorl, although a business genius, wastes his time and money in drinking and gambling. Gorl himself realizes that it is only his wealth that buys him immunity from the vicious elements of Cheyenne. Gorl consorts with Dollie, a Spanish dance-hall girl, and is amused at her conflicting impulses of affection and avarice.

Chief of the bad element of Cheyenne is Elder Keen, an apostate Mormon, shrewd and quiet, but the most deadly of gun-fighters. Among his satellites are Jack Hays, a noisy braggart, and Whisky Frank, a reputed killer. There is bad blood between Keen's killers, and Fevernager, Baltimore and Darby, but they have not fought.

One evening as Gorl and Darby are entering a dance hall they hear a shot. Rushing in, they find that Whisky Frank has mortally wounded an old prospector named Strawberry Sam, who was so indiscreet as to display a fat pouch of gold. Keen had been attempting, without success, to worm out of Sam the location of his strike. Now as Sam is dying he whispers to Darby, so that none of the killers can hear, the secret that will set the frontier afire, the secret that Darby is to carry to Fevernager, Sam's friend —that "The Black Hills are lousy with gold."

Darby eludes Keen and rides out onto the plains to Fevernager's camp. He gives Sam's last message to the old plainsman but neither he nor Baltimore are eager for gold. Nor will they assist Darby to find the rich strike, believing that a search for it will end in tragedy. So Darby reluctantly settles down to the business of killing and preparing buffalo for the market.

Darby becomes restless and rides into Cheyenne. He has a notion that he can persuade Gorl to organize a gold-seeking expedition to the Black Hills. His hopes are blasted when he meets the Spanish girl and hears that Elder Keen has taken Gorl off to his lair in the hills. The girl begs Darby to rescue Gorl. She fears that Keen will get him to sign away all his wealth, and then kill him. Darby consents to go.

Darby reaches Keen's lair, and knowing that the gun-fighter will never kill him while he holds Strawberry Sam's secret, boldly demands that Gorl be allowed to return in safety to Cheyenne. Just as Keen is about to gain the upper hand

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The Roaring TOWNS

By HUGH PENDEXTER

in this tilt, a squad of soldiers from Fort Russell rides up and Gorl and Darby are released.

Darby is disgusted with Gorl and returns to Fevernager's camp. He finds that Baltimore has had a dream in which the Thunder Birds of the Indian appeared and told him that he would kill a man who "would be painted red and standing in water." Baltimore then rides away to seek out a band of Sioux among whom he may perform the rites of the ***Heyoka Kaga.*** Darby and Fevernager are puzzled by their friend's dream and prepare to await his return in the spring.

Gorl comes unexpectedly to Fevernager's camp. He wishes to learn how to use the revolver so that he may be able to protect himself against Keen and his kind.

The three men return to Cheyenne for the winter. Gorl again becomes friendly with Keen and engages with him in jumping claims on land belonging to the railroad. Gorl has failed in several schemes to recover his fortune honestly and is gradually going to the dogs. Darby gives up his last hope of forming a business partnership with the Easterner.

Darby and Fevernager run into a half-breed named Kensler. He shows them some gold nuggets he has found in the Black Hills. Fevernager buys the nuggets and tells the breed to keep silent about them and to leave Cheyenne immediately. Fevernager then gladdens Darby by announcing that in the spring, when Baltimore returns, the three of them will seek gold in the Black Hills.

The railroad comes to Cheyenne and brings with it even more crime and disorder. Finally a vigilance committee is organized. It loses no time in taking action. Four men are hung for promiscuous shooting in a dance hall. This strikes terror among the vicious element. Next, lists are published by the committee, warning the worst of the miscreants to clear out of town. There follows an exodus of the law-breakers.

Gorl has by this time so misbehaved himself that he is listed to be hanged. Darby warns him and he flees with Keen to Laramie City, the most recent of the roaring railroad towns.

In the meantime Darby has taken a job as night watchman for the U. P. He goes to Laramie City on business for the railroad. There he finds Gorl more firmly in the clutches of Keen. While in a saloon, Darby witnesses Keen and his gang pin a murder onto Gorl. They antagonize the Easterner to draw his gun on a stranger. Gorl stands dazed, doing nothing, while one of Keen's followers slips up behind and shoots off the big fellow's gun. The stranger is killed.

Darby spreads the true version of the shooting. However, the citizens tell him that Gorl has been acting bad and is slated for a hanging as soon as they organize a vigilance committee. In vain Darby tells them that Gorl is really not bad, that he has fallen in with a vicious crowd and now finds it impossible to back out.

Before returning to Cheyenne, Darby informs Gorl how Keen framed him in the killing. He promises to help the Easterner in case of trouble.

CHAPTER VIII

ELDER KEEN'S RECKONING

CHEYENNE impressed Darby, on his return from Laramie, as being more quiet. The rush to the main fork of the Laramie had made a noticeable cut in the population. Not only had many of the toughs left town, but proprietors of saloons and dance-halls were moving their resorts to the new town. This latter class found the vigilance committee's restrictions working radically against profits. Laramie City would be wide open until a similar organization was formed there. By that time the parasites would be ready to move on to the next town.

Headquarters Saloon had rather slim patronage when Darby dropped in for his supper; but two men were present who evoked from him a sharp exclamation of delight. Fevernager and young Baltimore were in a corner, waiting to be served. Fevernager shouted affectionate profanity. Baltimore smiled and said but little. When conversation was reduced to order the old plainsman refused to talk until the Southerner had explained his absence and had sketched the town's history for the winter. As briefly as possible Darby complied, starting with Cheyenne and ending with his trip to Laramie City. In concluding he said:

"I've just had a disagreeable experience. Called on the little Spaniard and gave her a message from Gorl and tried to make her believe he is living straight. She is very young and very miserable."

"Gorl's a fool," grumbled Fevernager. "His highfalutin' plan for selling meat is most bodaciously busted. It ain't right the way he raised our hopes. Ain't fair. Nothing right about it."

"I can put through the same plan without his help, now that I'm acquainted with the local railroad officials," assured Darby.

"Hooray! Then it's time to pull out and git where we can breathe," cried the plainsman.

Darby slowly shook his head.

Baltimore remarked, "Our friend does not want to be a hunter."

"I'm just homesick for a big strike and a trip back to Louisiana," confessed Darby. "I'm going after gold if I go alone."

"Do that and your hair will be in the smoke," warned Baltimore. "You must have stout friends with you. Not many; a handful. They must be ready to hide from the Dakota; not fight."

Fevernager slapped Darby's shoulder heavily and joyously confided, "Younker's had another dream. He'll take us to the Black Hills and to as good a place as ever poor Strawberry Sam found."

Darby felt lifted up. His joy was reflected in his bronzed face. "That's all I can ask," he told them.

"Shouldn't be," corrected Fevernager. "Oughter ask him for his story. I run into him at old Fort Laramie. Make a talk younker."

Baltimore was willing to tell something of his experiences, but not much. He began, "First I went straight to the Medicine Wheel——"

"Up through the main cañon of the Little Big Horn and to the top of Medicine Mountain," interpolated the plainsman. "I've been there. Round circle like a wheel built of stone. Hub's three feet high. Twenty-seven lines of stones for the spokes. Buffler skulls on a slab facing the east."

Baltimore patiently continued, "The Indians do not know who built the wheel. It was so long ago. It is a medicine place and very *wakan*. It was there I had a dream. I saw a young girl, with a light streak through her black hair. It was my little sister. I was close to her and spoke, but she did not seem to see me, or hear me. There was a big noise and the Horsemen in the Cloud rode down. Again I was told I should kill a man while he was standing in water. The man would be painted red. The voice said I must be careful not to step on a frog between now and the time I kill the man. The frog, like all water folks, are under the protection of the Thunderers. Then I was told where I should go when the grass was high enough for the ponies."

"To the Mato Tipi country," whispered Fevernager in a hushed voice. "If that ain't luck, what is?"

"If it means Baltimore will show us where to find a few nuggets it's mighty lucky," joyously agreed the Southerner.

"The gold is there. You will find it. It may give you death, but I don't think so. In my dream I saw three men coming back."

"The three of us will come back," insisted Darby.

Baltimore said nothing. The old plainsman's eyes were worried as he explained, "The dream took him to his little sister. He thinks that means he'll die."

"But he dreamed three will return," Darby reminded.

"Death is opening a closed door," quietly reminded Baltimore. "What is there in this life that we should cling to it? I feel very lonely. I was with Black Dog's band a week and made my *Heyoka Kaga* medicine. I visited other villages. Crazy Horse was glad to see me and called me 'son.' I told him part of my dream. He said the Horsemen in the Cloud must be obeyed. He believes I shall die."

"If I believed you are to die I would refuse to go. We can go back to hunting," said Darby. He had no faith in dreams, yet the young man's words troubled him, or else it was the melancholy placidity of the dark face. If Baltimore could not enter and leave the Black Hills alive there would be but small chance for ordinary white men. Personally he welcomed the risk. He had risked his life in years of war for an idea. Now he was eager to toss it into the scales on the chance of finding gold. Yet nothing would tempt him to undertake a venture which meant death to either companion.

"Of course the younker's got to go. So we might as well go along with him," said the plainsman. "His sister didn't speak to him in the dream. That shows he wa'n't dead in th' dream. He'll ride back with us."

After supper the two hunters went to the railroad and remained some hours with Darby. As no thieves interrupted their smoking and talking Baltimore revealed more of the bizarre influence his long life among the Dakotas had registered on him. He was a white man with an indelible tinge to his line of reasoning that was acquired from red associates. Those outside his confidence might never suspect him, but to his friends the effect of his captivity was obvious. All water life was sacred, now that the Thunderers had so ordered. That his dream would be fulfilled he never for a moment doubted. He was puzzled as to whether the man "painted" red meant an Indian or a white man.

Fevernager had spent the winter in a Crow village west of Fort Reno. There were no dramatic spots in his recital, but Darby suspected he had taken a red wife to keep his lodge swept clean. Before they left him Darby asked when the trip north would be made.

"When the grass is high enough for the ponies," Baltimore replied.

"That will be very soon. The grass is up already. I can quit any time, allowing a day or so notice so they can get a new watchman."

Baltimore walked away without making a reply. Fevernager paused to hoarsely whisper, "It ain't the grass. He's waiting for another dream, one that'll tell him when to pull out, may have it tonight."

But May came and the railroad reached Laramie City, and Baltimore still remained in and around Cheyenne. He and the plainsman went out and shot game and brought a small quantity to the market. Travelers between the two towns brought back much gossip about Laramie. It was Deuce, the undersized gambler, whose talk interested and alarmed Darby. He had returned to Cheyenne because of his fear he would be caught and overwhelmed in the threatened wave of indignation.

"May bust loose any time," he told Darby. "Keen and Gorl have tough names. Elder knows he hasn't much longer to live off the town and he's carrying a high hand and trying to make a big clean-up before scooting. Gorl is with him quite a bit and gets a share of the blame for the Elder's cussedness. Elder's gone back to his old rough ways. Pokes a gun in a man's face and lets on the pot is his. Man politely says the same and quits the game, and goes out and tells some storekeeper."

"I was hoping Gorl would quit that snake," said Darby.

"Gorl's no good. Never'll make a gunfighter. Just has a blustering way of dropping his hand on a gun and scaring greenhorns. He's done that so much he dassent go 'round alone now. 'Fraid someone will call his hand. So he sticks to the Elder. He's a big, heavy man, but they've got a rope strong enough to pull his feet off the ground once the town chips in."

From others Darby heard much the same. Laramie City was passing through a delirium of lawlessness. More dead men had been found out on the prairie. These deliberate murders were more terrible than the usual killings. One beautiful May morning the station agent aroused Darby at the Wyoming House, shortly after he had fallen asleep, and abruptly announced:

"Division superintendent wants you for a daylight job right away."

Darby rose and dressed and buckled on his gun and asked the nature of his work.

"Paymaster wounded and his assistant killed at Laramie City. You're picked to go after the cusses. Steam's up in an engine that'll take you there flying."

Darby had eaten before retiring, and he hurried to the station. From the agent he secured a second gun. He had a foot on the cab step when he remembered his friends. He told the agent, "Fevernager and young Baltimore, who've been running around with me, may come here, looking for me. Explain I am out of town for a few days, and that I hope they'll wait. They'll understand."

"Know both of them well. They'll get your message."

Darby swung into the cab and was soon roaring over the recently constructed track. The fifty-six miles were completed without a halt, and once the engine slowed down Darby was off and hurrying to the station agent's office to secure particulars.

"Two damn pests did it," bitterly began the agent. "Poor Durgin was shot through the head. Paymaster escaped death by an inch. Boldest thing you ever saw. Right in broad daylight. They didn't get the pay-roll as it was in a stout bag and locked about the paymaster's waist. They mounted and rode north. Seen by the construction crew. Probably making for Jackson's Hole. They have a big lead, but you must overhaul them before they make the Hole, or not catch 'em at all. You ought to have someone go with you. That Keen is a terror."

"Keen?" repeated Darby. "Who's the other man?" And his heart sank, for he knew what the answer would be.

"Supposed you were told the names before you quit Cheyenne. Other man is a big fellow, a pilgrim. Plays at being bad. Name of Gorl."

"Describe the shooting."

"Keen shoved a gun under the paymaster's chin. Durgin leaped between them, his gun half out of the holster, and Keen shot him through the head. The next instant he had shot the paymaster through the chest and was kneeling beside him, trying to get the money pouch loose from his belt. He yelled for Gorl to pass him a knife so he could cut the bag open, but Gorl stood gawking as if stunned. By this time men were running up, shooting as they came. Keen had run for it. He held the men back by emptying his guns until he could reach the horses. The two climbed into the saddle and rode off. A dozen men rode after them, but they were not the kind to chase Elder Keen. He shot one of their horses through the head at a good eighty yards."

"They got away," hastily interrupted Darby. "Did the man Gorl do any shooting?"

"Men said he acted stupid. A horse is waiting for you and a package of cooked meat and some bread. Want a rifle?"

"Not if Keen has only his belt-guns."

"All he had when he rode for it. You ought to have some of the boys go with you."

"No. I ride alone."

Then commenced a long chase. If the fugitives were not overhauled before they reached Jackson's Hole, the beautiful valley at the east base of the Tetons, pursuit would be futile. For four days Darby clung to the trail, finding where the two men halted to cook game and rest their horses. Once when the trail was lost a Canadian Frenchman happened along and set him right. Another time a Dakota man and his squaw indicated the passing of two white men, and by pointing to the sun and holding up one finger told Darby the quarry was a day ahead.

Darby was in great torment as he pressed the chase. The thought of killing Gorl was abhorrent. To make him captive and carry him back to be hanged was the terrible alternative. There was never a doubt in his mind as to the outcome once he came up with the two men. He was thoroughly convinced he would kill Keen. When he halted to snatch a bit of sleep and rest his mount his mind pictured him returning to tell the Spanish girl he had killed the Easterner. He winced and groaned as he saw the tragedy in her small face. Although Gorl had been worse than a failure, his coming unwittingly had worked to lift her from her wretched plane.

By the end of the fourth day Darby

found his iron nerve was breaking. He was not conscious of any physical exhaustion. He was being whipped by mental torment. Then came the insidious suggestion of taking more time. If the two men escaped Keen would meet retribution sometime. He shook himself clear of the temptation and said aloud, "No! He's cumbered the earth too long."

A muffled report came as an echo of his words. At first he believed he had been sighted and that Keen was shooting at him. A survey of the country ahead told him this could not be. He was in open country and Keen would not fire when out of range. He was riding toward a grove of cottonwoods and aspens and these, with the richer green of the grass, proclaimed the presence of a spring creek. There was the one shot. Darby decided it had been fired at game.

Risking fire from the growth Darby galloped on. He reached the cover and flung himself from his horse and waited. He had expected a shot, but the grove was quiet. As he stole through the trees he was startled by a loud groan. Fearing a trap he stalked the spot cautiously and was rewarded by discovering a booted leg protruding from a clump of aspens. Running forward he found himself staring into the bearded face of Gorl. An immense feeling of relief surged through him. He had never anticipated this way out of his dilemma.

Gorl groaned again and tried to move. Darby sprang to his side and kneeled and attempted to lift the man's head. He snatched back his hand and stared at the blood. Blood began showing through the long hair. Gorl was staring at him incredulously. The hat on the ground beside him was perforated by two holes. Gun in hand Darby teetered back and forth on his toes as he crouched low and glared suspiciously about.

"Damn him!" weakly cried Gorl. "He's been the death of me! Wanted both horses to make his escape. Shot me without warning."

Darby relaxed and dropped forward on his knees and said, "You're talking too much for a man shot through the head. Let's see how badly you're hurt."

He examined the wound and did not know whether to be sorry, or glad, when he had finished. The bullet had plowed through the thick hair and removed a long strip of skin.

He sharply commanded, "Stop groaning. You're not hurt. You're not surprised to see me up here? You know what it means?"

Gorl bolstered himself up by resting on his elbows and decided he was not mortally hurt. As his wits sharpened he whispered, "After us! If that isn't fate! Chased by the preacher. A few minutes sooner and you'd bagged Keen."

"Does Keen know I'm trailing him?"

"No. He said we'd be chased, that it wouldn't amount to anything."

"I see some whisky in your camp gear. Wash your head. I'm leaving you to overtake Keen."

"It's fate. I'm through fighting fate. Take my guns. You'll find me here when you get back."

"You may need one of your guns," slowly remarked Darby, rising to his feet.

"I can't do that!" moaned Gorl. "I've tried to bring myself to it. But I'm too much of a coward. I can't. He ought to have made a clean job of it. Missed at ten feet! Oh, damn him!"

Darby ran back and secured his horse and rode through the grove and crossed the creek. He was hoping, and dreading, to hear a shot behind him. But Gorl had spoken truthfully. He could not do it. Doubly incensed against the Elder the Southerner urged his tired mount on. Keen, having two horses, would escape unless overtaken before discovering he was closely followed. It was close to sundown when he left Gorl. By the time he had winded his horse, darkness of itself was demanding a halt. Picketing the horse he slept till the first light permitted him to make out the rolling ridges.

From the start he held his mount to gallop, believing the chase would be won or lost within the next three hours. The result depended on how early a start Elder Keen made. Before the sun had shown more than a red rim Darby was thrilled by catching the aroma of wood smoke. Ahead was a rocky knoll, covered with cedars, and he knew their dark silhouettes marked the camp of the fugitive.

A tiny creek wound around the north base of the knoll and was fringed with timber. Halting near the rise and securing his horse, Darby crept up the slope, a gun in each hand. Gaining the top he looked down on the blaze of a small fire.

He heard a horse beyond the creek whinny. He caught the appetizing odor of frying meat. Once he believed he saw a furtive figure pass between the trees.

Descending as stealthily as possible he reached the foot of the slope and was behind a cottonwood when Keen's harsh voice fiercely demanded:

"Who's there?"

"Allan Gorl," huskily replied Darby.

"Gorl?" shrilly exclaimed the Elder. "Ghost or—go back!"

"Come here!" hoarsely commanded Darby.

He heard the clicking of revolvers being cocked. If Keen had been seized at first by superstition he was now prepared for gun-play. Darby heard a stealthy step or two and feared the man was making to ford the creek and gain his horses. Yet he did not move from behind the tree. Fully five minutes passed before he caught another telltale sound. It was very faint and on his left. Instead of attempting flight Keen was advancing to the slope of the knoll.

Darby shifted his position to retain the shelter of the tree. Another nerve-wracking pause. If Keen had moved there was no sound to indicate it. Fearing his nerves would not sustain the tension the Southerner bent down and found a loose piece of the outcropping rock. With a short arm throw he hurled this into the cedars up the slope. Almost as it struck a bough with slight noise a heavy gun boomed. Without further hesitation Darby bent half doubled and made for the source of the shot.

The sun now was lighting the timber along the creek. Keen was standing with his tall, thin body close to a tree, his long face drawn down in haggard lines, his eyes glaring suspiciously up the dark slope. His profile was presented to Darby as the latter halted by a tree scarcely six inches in diameter. The Southerner had no niceties of feeling in regard to killing the murderer. But he did desire that for the infinitesimal part of a second Keen should realize in what shape doom had reached down to blot him out.

With the long barrel of his Navy covering the man he started to announce his name and purpose. He barely had mouthed a syllable before the figure pivoted with marvelous quickness and began shooting with both hands. Two bullets hit the cottonwood before Darby could pull the trigger. With Darby's first shot Keen lurched sideways and dropped a gun. The next shot brought him to his knees and he fired his last bullet into the ground a few feet before him. Then he feebly raised his arm to hurl the empty weapon, and for the third time Darby fired. The heavy ball struck under the right arm and passed through the thin body. Even then the long, thin fingers, working mechanically, half cocked the useless weapon. Bullets had torn the back of Darby's coat and knocked his hat to the ground.

Darby halted and with gun half raised, called out, "Are you dead, Keen?"

"Dying," gasped the Elder.

"Remember Strawberry Sam. His gold came from the Black Hills. I said you'd die like this."

Then came the death rattle.

WHEN Darby rejoined Gorl the latter was sitting up, his head bound in a handkerchief, his hands clasped around his knees, his brooding gaze fixed on the ground. He lifted his head with a jerk and stared incredulously at the Southerner and the two horses he was leading. The whole story was told by the long black coat and the two heavy guns strapped to an empty saddle.

"Keen's dead!" muttered Gorl. "You're wonderful, Darby."

"I've finished a very pleasant job. Now comes a tougher one. You must go back with me."

"But not to be hung, Darby! Oh, my God! Listen, Darby, I never dreamed what Keen was up to. Never dreamed he was planning a robbery till he stuck the gun in that man's face. I was stunned by it all. You must believe me! You can't take me back to be hung. Leave me here. I'll ride west till I die of starvation."

The man was now on his feet, his hands clawing before him. Without a word Darby dismounted and secured the animals and proceeded to examine Gorl's wound. All the time the Easterner was declaring his innocence, and insisting Keen never betrayed his purpose until he covered the paymaster with a gun. Darby seated himself and tried to think. His mind was divided. During the return trip he had, he believed, come to a decision. If he found

Gorl at the grove he would take him back. If he found him dead, or a fugitive, he would consider his business finished. Now he was satisfied Gorl spoke the truth when he said he had not contemplated the robbery. Gorl suddenly ceased his pleadings and began to weep.

In horror and disgust Darby told him, "Don't do that! Take your gun and blow your head off."

"Oh, it's not for myself I'm thinking now," groaned Gorl. "It's that poor child down in Cheyenne. Darby, aside from my parents, she's the only human being who ever loved me. She started in to clean me out, seeing I was a fool. She changed entirely when my luck grew bad. She pitied me. My God! Pity from a dance-hall girl! Yet it's the only pity ever felt for me."

"I pity you from the bottom of my heart," hoarsely said Darby. "There's many better worth saving than you, Allan Gorl. Yet I can't get it out of my head that you've been a blundering fool rather than a villain."

"All that, and more. But you don't believe I ever dreamed of Keen's purpose when he went out to butcher that poor young man and steal the money."

Squarely facing the question Darby finally answered, "No. I can't make myself believe that. A blusterer and a fool; yes. And a man in business affairs, but a boy in make-believe. But see what it's brought you to. It's my duty to take you back, and the temper of Laramie citizens won't permit of any explanations from you. If they heard them they would not believe you."

Gorl walked to the creek and back. "It is your duty," he announced, halting and staring down at the Southerner. "We'll mount and start back." This was said without any touch of emotion, and in the quiet tone of one who must face the inevitable.

Darby got to his feet and brought up the horses. Gorl mounted without any assistance and the return to Laramie commenced.

The next morning found the Easterner weak and Darby had hard work to induce him to eat any breakfast. He was silent, and Darby was in no mood for talk. That day the Southerner followed a course that took them closer to the foothills of the Medicine Bow Range. For two days more they skirted the foothills, riding leisurely.

At the end of the third day Darby angrily asked, "Why haven't you lighted out? You're able to make a long ride and I've slept sound. Why didn't you go?"

Gorl stared at him forlornly and told him, "I tried to do that; but I couldn't. I've been remembering that I used to be a square man and always ready to stand my part of the gaff. That's before I found the devil waiting for me in this country. It's your duty to take me back, you said. I'll not come between you and that duty. I begin to get the idea. It's compensation. We demand that in business. It must rule in other phases of life, whether we're willing or not. I can't escape it by running away."

"You're a bigger fool than I had supposed," Darby bitterly arraigned. "I give you a chance to run for it. You refuse to take it. The Spanish girl would want you to take it."

"Run where? Could I ever run away from myself? The game must be played as it lays. Keen has paid. Dollie has paid. Why shouldn't I pay what I owe. You'll find me in my blankets in the morning."

It was the morning of their last camp. They were some ten miles west of Laramie City, and Darby was slow in taking to horse. He even walked aside and stood for several minutes, staring up at the Medicine Bow. His face was furrowed in a frown when he returned to Gorl.

He abruptly began, "See here, Gorl. I can't go through with it. They'd surely hang you off-hand. The Elder's long coat must satisfy justice. I've been building up to this decision for the last three days. I swung wide to the west so you could ride for it if I did come to the decision I've now reached. This is what you must do: follow the foothills down for a day, then ride due east, cutting across the railroad and keeping well north of Cheyenne. Make Horse Creek. That's twenty-five or thirty miles north of Cheyenne. There's a small ranch there. I believe it's where Willie Swager stayed before coming to find the Elder. No one from Cheyenne is likely to recognize you with that beard. You're to wait there for me to pick you up. I'll join you in a few days, or send Deuce with a message."

"Darby, if you can't do this honorably—"

"Shut up and do as I say. I'll report at Laramie that Keen shot you. I've killed Keen. The world moves fast in Laramie, and they'll forget you inside of forty-eight hours after I've made my report. I'll bring, or send you a plan of action very soon."

"You'll tell Dollie, without being too rough on me?"

"Not where you are. She'd be going to you. I'm expecting to ride north to the Black Hills soon, for gold. If my plan falls through I'll tell her where you are. Then she and you can get out of the country."

"But if your plan goes through? You mean—?" His voice was hoarse with eager hope.

"Pick you up and take you along, if my friends will agree. But I shouldn't tell you this as there's a strong chance one of them will object."

"Take me! Take me! Tell the girl I'll come back with gold. I'm hogged out, Darby. I can't go back East and begin over. I can't do anything out here. It would be kinder to hang me than to turn me loose, broke, to shift for myself without even a name. Get your friends to agree. Get——"

"I'll do my best. Here's my hand and hoping we meet soon at Horse creek and ake the ride north together."

CHAPTER IX

FORBIDDEN GROUND

THE ninety odd miles to James Bordeaux's old roadhouse and ranch, on the south side of the North Platte and nine miles east of Fort Laramie, was covered without incident by the four adventurers. They followed the military road between Forts Russell and Laramie for much of the journey, and had planned to travel it through to the fort. It was after they had crossed Lodge Pole and Horse Creeks and had halted at Bordeaux's new store on the Chug that they believed it advisable to change their plans. As they rode up to the store they met the weekly mail-carrier of the Quartermaster's Department about to continue his trip to Cheyenne and Fort Russell. After exchanging greetings and shrewdly eying the four heavily laden burros he warned:

"Injuns north of the Platte are uneasy."

"We'll keep clear of redskins," assured Fevernager. "What's the general layout just now?"

The mail-carrier knew his subject and proceeded to explain that the peace commission, appointed in July of the preceding year, had reported in January that the increased rancor of the tribes against whites was due to the behavior of the whites, both civilians and soldiers. In this connection he illustrated:

"If one white man among a thousand takes a shot at an Indian the Plains tribes are poisoned against the thousand."

He added that it was unfortunate the Medicine Lodge Creek treaties had not been ratified by the Senate, and that as a result the Indians were uneasy over a delay which they did not understand.

"You git a chance to read all the newspapers!" admiringly broke in Fevernager.

"And hear what the officers have to say," modestly admitted the mail-carrier. He then announced it would be fully a month before Congress would appropriate the half a million dollars necessary to carry out the treaty stipulations; and that the red men could not understand why the Great Father in Washington had done nothing during the eleven months elapsing since the tribes sent their large delegations to the banks of the Medicine Lodge.

"The Cheyennes and Arapahoes will never be satisfied with the reservations selected for them in that gypsum belt between the southern boundary of Kansas and the Cimarron," the carrier prophesied.

"Of course not," readily agreed Fevernager. "Many of the cricks are bitter. Injuns have to have good water and grass as well as whites and hosses. Ain't fair, ain't just. Nothing right about it. When you want to mix things up most bodaciously you want to send a parcel of greenhorns out here from Washington. Have any of 'em begin to act out yet?"

"Some of the young men, Cheyennes and Arapahoes, have raided the Pawnees on the Saline."

"Then that means they'll be counting coup for white scalps soon," declared the plainsman.

The carrier gazed searchingly at the patient burros, and warned, "You folks will get into trouble you'll never get out of. You've got picks in those sacks. I see the end of a handle. That means you've got shovels. I'll tell you now you're wasting your time. You'll never get by the fort with that outfit. You ought to know better than to help upset things and make matters worse. The reds have been fighting for nearly two years and just now their courage is low. If nothing new comes up to arouse them the peace commission, with all its delays, will accomplish something. Last month a band of Oglalas signed the treaty at the fort. Other bands are coming. But Red Cloud and Spotted Tail haven't signed; and they're the two gentlemen whose names we want. The one thing to undo all the work of the peace commission is for a band of whites to go after gold north of the Platte. You might as well turn back. You'll never get by the fort."

"Well, maybe we will turn back," spoke up Darby.

The mail could wait no longer, and the carrier nodded curtly and with a last disapproving glance at the pick handle, galloped down the road. Darby complained because the packs permitted evidence of their purpose to show. The old plainsman replied, "Don't have to see a pick to know what we're after. Four burros loaded with grub 'n' ammunition. So we can't be going on a trading venture. That leaves gold."

Gorl turned his bearded face to the south. Abandonment of the trip, he believed, would be a greater blow to him than to his companions. He was convinced his one chance for rehabilitation pivoted on the possibility of finding gold.

Fevernager was buried in thought for a minute and then announced, "I'll go inside and have an open talk with Ed Foucks, the old bull-whacker. He's going to take over this store. No matter what his advice is he won't split on us."

He entered the middle of the three small log huts and finding Foucks alone he frankly explained that he and his companions proposed crossing the Platte "to take a look for gold."

"Then keep away from Laramie and swing off to Bordeaux's old place down the river. Since Swolley and Cy Williams killed a breed Sioux boy last March the Injuns, always hanging around the fort, have been in an ugly state of mind. They caught Williams and rubbed him out at the Coffey and Kuny ranch, five miles east of the fort; but they ain't satisfied yet. They may git me after I take on down here. For a new ranch this is a deadly place. Hugh Whiteside, the first manager, was killed by a badman, called Franklin, early last winter as he was standing behind that very counter. But I'm taking my chances. Still there's one thing I ain't got nerve enough to do; and that's to go gold-hunting up north. But your hair's your own."

Fevernager was worried: not about any danger from the Dakota, but for fear young Baltimore would refuse to go ahead with the venture. He left the store and joined young Baltimore, who was seated apart from Gorl and Darby, his gaze fixed on the ground. He had not spoken during or since the mail-carrier's talk. The plainsman announced:

"Ed Foucks says to steer clear of Fort Laramie and jump off from Bordeaux's old place."

"That's a good talk," replied Baltimore without lifting his head.

"You're thinkin' of quitting?" anxiously asked the plainsman.

"No. Been thinking about Gorl. Taking him along is a mistake. My dream didn't provide for him. If Darby wasn't a good friend I never would have taken him with us."

"But we'll go ahead just the same?"

"I must. You folks don't have to. The dream bothers me. If three come back who are they? We're four."

"Prob'ly Gorl will be rubbed out, if anyone," replied Fevernager.

"If you have that in your head you should tell him, so he can pull out," gravely insisted Baltimore.

Fevernager walked over to the two men and repeated the gist of his talk with Foucks and Baltimore. In concluding he explained, "We sorter feel Gorl won't come back with us. Three of us know the game. Gorl's a greenhorn. We're just leavin' it to him to say if he'll keep on, or turn back while his hide's whole."

"I will go on with you," earnestly declared the Easterner. "Can't you see there's nothing else for me to do? That there's no other place for me to jump to? I don't believe in dreams: but even if I believed I was to die up here I'd go on just the same. I'm in a road so narrow I can't turn around. First thing is to dodge the fort."

"Then we won't talk, nor fret any more about it," cheerfully said Fevernager. "We'll make Bordeaux's old place. Soldiers from the fort may turn us back. We may git through part way and be rubbed out; at least one of us. It's a gamble, with a cold deck against us. Still, th' youmker's medicine's mighty strong. He says three oughter git back. If I'm rubbed out they ain't cheated me out of much. Greatest danger'll come when we're nearin' th' hills. If we're caught up there, dream or no dream, some Injuns will have new scalps to dance. They wouldn't let Cap'n Warren's big gov'ment expedition enter the hills in '56. An' they're a hundred times more jealous of their Mato Tipi country now. No wonder. It's where their gods live when they snoop down on earth for a little change."

It was because of these talks on the Chugwater that they swung aside and reached Bordeaux's first ranch without sighting the fort. They camped a short distance from the small ranch-house in some cottonwoods and Fevernager rode on alone to the fort to learn the latest news of the north country. He had been a visitor to, and a hanger-on of, the fort many times since William Sublette and William Campbell erected it on the Laramie fork in 1834, as the first permanent post in what soon was to be Wyoming. To him it was identified with memories of the brave days when one might meet there besides the original proprietors, such men as Bridger, Fitzpatrick, Fontenelle, Basil La Jeneusse, and a host of other great traders and trappers. Those were the halcyon days in Fevernager's estimation, and they extended unbroken until the American Fur Company sold it to the Government in 1849. He would always believe the purchase price of four thousand dollars was a pitiful sum to pay for the privilege of wiping out an era of romance and daring. He remembered it as it was in '49, when Indian warriors in buffalo robes, some white, and their squaws and children, were ever coming and going. That small fort of sun-dried bricks and clay bastions, with the crude picture of a galloping horse over the gateway; the burial scaffolds of the Dakota dotting the desolate plains, was well worth remembering. Seven hundred miles from the United States' most western outposts, Fort Laramie was an absolute monarch. Always the Indians, coming and going, and the first emigrant trains, the men's faces looking thin under broad-brimmed hats, their eyes staring from constant study of the endless prairies, and, withal, awkward in their brown homespun. And for a background was the seven-thousand-foot wall of the Laramie Mountains. Now new buildings changed the appearance of the historic place, and Fevernager felt toward the post much as one does on meeting a person who has no individuality.

He did not care to be seen and detained by his acquaintances among the officers. The glory of the place had largely vanished and he wished to be as brief as possible. He made direct for the post-sutler's store, and drew the sutler, Seth Ward, aside and asked for news. Ward could tell him nothing he had not heard from the mail-carrier, but the old man's line of questions caused the suspicious query:

"Just what game are you up to, Fevernager? If you want to cross the river the commander will be glad to send you with a talk to some of the chiefs."

"No, not now. Just lazin' 'round a bit. Since '62 you've finnified this post up so I'd never known it if it wasn't for the ridges, the hills and the river. See ye again soon, mebbe."

The spirit of the old days was over him as he allowed his horse to take his time in carrying him back to the ranch. His thoughts were almost kindly as he recalled the defeats suffered by the western Dakotas in '45, and then the tremendous excitement among the Plains tribes in the following year. It was but yesterday that a son of his friend, The Whirlwind, Oglala chief, and a small band had been wiped out by the Snakes in crossing the Laramie Plains, and more than a score of years had elapsed. He was shaken out of his reveries by the sound of a horse galloping up behind him. The rider was young Kensler.

"The old man rides without a pack," he greeted in Teton as he pulled up alongside. "He goes to the fort and buys nothing."

They were now in sight of the ranch and the plainsman knew the breed's sharp eyes had noticed the men lounging before the house. He answered, "Rode up to Bordeaux's with three friends. Got any more nuggets to sell?"

The breed shook his head. His eyes

glittered with hate as he eagerly asked, "Is the man Keen there? I see three men. I do not see their faces."

"Keen's dead. Darby killed him."

"Good! Keen tried to kill me. He shot my bottle of whisky to pieces. I see a big man with hair on his face. Is it the man Gorl?"

The plainsman was amazed the breed could recognize the Easterner at the distance, and do so despite the beard. He nodded an affirmative and Kensler remarked, "He bought nuggets of me. But he was the friend of the man Keen."

"Keen tried to kill him. Darby shot Keen."

Kensler nodded slowly, his gaze smouldering as he recalled his drunken ride through the streets of Cheyenne and again saw the tall, slim figure of Elder Keen deliberately try to shoot him off the horse's back. Fevernager halted, hoping the breed would not ride to the ranch. The latter asked, "White men liked my gold?"

"As good as money. No better than money," carelessly replied the plainsman, walking his horse forward as Kensler showed no disposition to turn back.

"The man Gorl wanted my gold. Keen wanted it. You bought it when I told where it came from. That is a very bad place for white men."

"For Dakota men, too, if they don't hurry through," heartily agreed Fevernager. "It's a very strong medicine place."

"If a white man goes there he will soon hear a ghost talking to him."

"That's right. White man would be a fool to go there."

Kensler leaned forward and stared earnestly; then wheeled his horse and rode at breakneck speed up the road toward the fort. The plainsman cursed earnestly in his beard as he saw burros grazing close by the men. Their packs had been removed, but they were burros, pack-animals. He looked back and saw the breed disappear between two low hills; then he clapped his heels and galloped to the ranch.

He swung off his horse beside Baltimore, who was standing near one of the many graves which dotted the border of the old road for many miles to the east. Without glancing up at the plainsman he said, "Here is buried a man who has opened and closed a door. Now he knows all things. But only in a dream can one of us see what happens beyond that door."

"Some poor cuss who pegged out trying to make the Oregon country, or Californy, most likely."

Gorl came up and broke in, "You were talking with an Indian."

"What I wanted to mention. Young Kensler. He saw the burrers. You oughter kept 'em down by the camp. Reckon he l'arned all he wanted to 'bout us when he seen 'em."

"I saw him turn back. That was enough. He thinks we are riding north. He goes to tell some of his mother's people," said Baltimore.

"We'll pull out soon as it gits dark. Kensler may talk at the fort and we'd find soldiers down here. He's neither red, nor white, and yet he's both. I could tell what Crazy Hoss, or Spotted Tail, or Red Cloud, would be likely to do, but it's guess-work when it comes to that young half-breed."

"Looks like rain," warned Gorl, who had been studying masses of dark clouds in the northwest.

"All the better for us," Baltimore told him.

The night was very dark, although the threatened rain did not reach them; and Darby, a seasoned campaigner, was puzzled at times to sense the direction they were taking. Gorl complained they were traveling in a circle. Their course, however, was almost due north. The plainsman and Baltimore led the way with Darby and the Easterner bringing up the patient burros. Fevernager announced they had covered fifteen miles when a halt was called to rest the tired animals and enjoy a few hours sleep.

After three hours the journey was continued under a cold gray sky and with a cold wind defying the almanac's assertion it was balmy June. They were passing through a bleak and barren country and would be without wood for fifty miles, the plainsman reminded. The grass was poor and much of the land was alkali. The burros trudged along sturdily, but the horses were jaded, and after being held up to fifteen miles, a halt was made on the Rawhide. Light showers of rain added to the dismal aspect of the lonely land. Dismal with sagebrush and white patches of alkali the strip of green along the creek kept the horses from wandering. At dusk they saddled and pushed on for ten miles to Rawhide Springs when it was decided a day's rest was imperative for their mounts. The burros were far superior to the horses in finding food, as they would make a dinner of sagebrush if nothing better were available. Gorl had complained that the journey was delayed by the pack-animals, and reprobated them for being slow. This angered Fevernager, and he talked sharply to the Easterner.

Gorl apologized, "I meant no offense. But they are slow. I wouldn't have spoken if I'd known it would get on your nerves."

"It's bad medicine when four men cannot travel without talking loud," warned Baltimore.

The next afternoon, when they broke camp and took a course to swing wide of Rawhide Buttes and make the Running Water, an incident occurred that convinced Gorl a burro could move quickly enough when he so desired. The sun was out and the warmth was welcome after the overcast sky. The lead-burro, an old campaigner, was plodding along, with eyes half closed, when Fevernager called back to look out for a rattlesnake. Darby and Gorl swung to one side. The burros continued their direct course. The foremost saw the snake coiled on a warm rock, and despite his pack attacked the reptile with the agility of a cat catching a mouse.

"They'll kill every rattler that crosses their path," explained Darby.

"I apologize to the whole family of burros," Gorl contritely announced. They crossed the Running Water and continued through the desolate alkali country, camping for part of a night, and completing twenty miles after starting at sunrise. The monotony of the journey seemed interminable to Gorl, perhaps the most desperate of the four to discount all dangers in trying to reach the hills.

At last the way selected by Baltimore took a side-hill grade and brought them to the shoulder of a high bluff. Here they gladly would have lingered if not for the danger of being spied by wandering Indians. Below them was the valley of the Hat, its banks a vivid green in contrast to the surrounding country. What was most impressive was their view of the Black Hills, so named from the thick pine growth covering their slopes. The mountain mass rose from the prairie. They went into camp that evening on the Hat, having traveled some fifteen miles.

They had followed, roughly, a route which was to be famous as the Cheyenne Trail; and they would have been amazed could they have foreseen the changes much travel by ox and mule-trains was to make over a country seldom traversed except on horseback. "Trail" ordinarily means a narrow and, at times, a twisting path. But the call of gold from 1873 to 1877, when freighting by ox-trains would reach its height in this section of the West, was to make the trail a deeply worn road, several miles wide in places. Especially between Cheyenne and the Chugwater would the innumerable outfits cut to right and left to find hard top-soil, or sod, and thereby take side-hill grades where no wagon had been before. These detours to escape deeply rutted, or muddy ground were to scarify the land to an extent most amazing to the original owners. Where the Indian pony had raced at top speed were to be lanes, several miles wide, cut deep by many wheels.

No Indians had been seen, and Gorl could not understand why any aborigine should care to visit such a forsaken area. He was inclined to scoff at the precautions insisted upon by the plainsman and Baltimore. At no time during the journey had a fire been lighted in the daytime, lest the smoke bring mounted warriors down upon them. So far as the Easterner had observed this isolated piece of the world was empty. Their packs contained a generous supply of provisions, but when Gorl saw antelope he longed for fresh meat. But no gun was fired.

As they smoked their pipes after a late supper of tinned food and hardtack the Easterner remarked, "More peaceful up here than in the towns."

"Just now," agreed Fevernager. "But let one red scout stick his head over the nearest sky line an' spot us, and all hell will be buzzing round your ears."

"If we meet any Dakota men do not try to fight," earnestly warned Baltimore. "Let me talk to them."

"You and Fevernager know them. You could talk us out of any trouble," said Darby.

"If we meet any before we get into the hills, yes. They would take our outfit and turn us loose. But if we are caught in the hills it will take a very strong medicine to save your scalps."

"Meaning you would be spared?" asked Gorl.

"I think so. That is the risk you run. You knew all about it before we started."

"We'd be just as dead whether you escaped or died with us," Darby philosophically remarked. "We knew the risk we ran and insisted on running it."

"There's no other way open to me. It's the greatest gamble I've ever taken, but I'm glad I'm here," said Gorl.

"That's the way to talk," endorsed Fevernager. "I come along for the fun of it. Gold won't help me any. We'll hide snug in the hills. Injuns are scared of the bodacious thunder storms up there. Just sneak in an' out to git lodge-poles, or hurry through as a cut-off to the Powder River 'n' Big Horn country. But I reckon Baltimore's wrong 'bout bein' set free to walk back to the Laramie Fork. I reckon we're too far away to throw any bluffs. If we're jumped by a small band I vote for standin' 'em off."

"That is something to be talked about when it happens," uneasily said Baltimore. "But I expect we'll enter the hills without being seen. My medicine talks that way. If there was trouble in my path my dream would have told it. After this one of us will scout ahead."

They rested that night, and by sunrise had eaten and were in the saddle. Gray clouds threatened rain and the air was cold and damp. During the ten-mile ride to Indian Creek the clouds gave way and the sun brought them optimism. Passing close to a yellow bluff they came to the stream. Its banks were high and steep and covered with a heavy growth. The bed was six hundred feet wide with a small stream wandering from side to side. They crossed without much difficulty and began mounting to higher ground. Their stock needed water and the creek was alkali. The white patches scattered along their way suggested a light fall of snow. Soon the travel grew more difficult, the country being much broken and uninviting because of its wildness. They were continually ascending or descending, the ridges stretching across their way. With their range of vision abruptly abbreviated by sharply rising ground it was necessary for Baltimore and the plainsman to take turns scouting ahead. Even when topping a ridge it was impossible to see if the hollow beyond the next rise was empty, or concealed a band of warriors. When an hour's ride from the creek they experienced their first alarm. Fevernager was scouting ahead, and he rode down the ridge part way and signaled them to halt. Baltimore galloped on to keep the plainsman's horse from wandering after his master, and the latter returned to the crest, and lying flat, cautiously spied on something that held him motionless for half an hour.

On rejoining his friends he announced, "Twenty dots in the nor'east was that many bucks. They came out of th' hills an' was hustlin' southeast. If I hadn't had my old peepers open they'd spotted us. But they're gone an' we can push on."

Baltimore now took his turn scouting ahead and the horses were forced on until they came in sight of the Buffalo Gap Bluffs far off to their right. An old Indian trail passed through this gap and led to the White. When the outfit came up with Baltimore the horses, regardless of their riders' efforts, made for a pool of brackish water where Baltimore's horse was drinking. A heavy rain had filled a hollow. Fevernager and Baltimore conferred briefly and announced to their companions their decision to camp there for the night as beyond the next high ridge was another Indian trail. Fevernager did not add to Gorl's and Darby's peace of mind any when he added:

"This is th' most ticklish camp we've made. But I reckon we'll fetch th' Cheyenne tomorrer without trouble, an' once we cross that we'll be all right if we don't run into some of th' Dakotas in Red Cañon."

The night passed without alarm, and after Baltimore, looking as much an Indian as any Dakota, had scouted the country ahead, every effort was made to reach the river.

The day was clear and like a June day in New England. There were no alarms and late afternoon brought them to the river. Now the horses and men could enjoy water and Baltimore considered it a good omen that the water gods were propitious. He explained that the river tricked men whose medicine was weak. In less than a day it might be bank-full and hard to ford at dusk because of quicksands.

Now the depth was not more than knee high and with him going ahead they crossed easily. But Darby noticed Fevernager rode behind the burros, trusting to their instinct to find a way. Where the burros would go would be safe for a horse. Did they balk Fevernager would have accepted their judgment in preference to any medicine.

That night the wind shifted from the south to the east and blew up a rain. Over a cheerless breakfast Fevernager and Baltimore discussed the advisability of making for the cañon at once. Ordinarily, Baltimore explained, it would be better to travel the cañon at night as the Dakotas did not relish traversing it in the darkness. Weighing against this was the possibility of running into a band camping at the north end of the cañon. In favor of a daylight passage through the cañon was the rain, as the Dakotas would not care to be caught in the narrow pass while the Thunderers were riding to war. And there was the certainty of capture if Indians were met in the cañon, day or night. The two requested Gorl and Darby to express a preference.

"Let's start now. Sooner we're through the better I'll like it," promptly announced Gorl.

"That's my way of thinking," added Darby.

The burros were packed and the horses saddled and a start made at once for the mouth of the entrance, four miles away. They traveled without pause and with no attempt at secrecy. It was either the door to a wonder land, or a death trap. In the years ahead The Dakota would count coup there on many a white man and woman, and road-agents would find it an excellent place for robbery.

The travelers entered twilight once they rode through the mouth. The high walls were of a loose red sandstone formation, and Baltimore in a whisper told Fevernager at his side they were medicine. The sound of the horses hoofs echoed hollowly. Baltimore believed the spirit guardians of the hills were present and watching him. It eased his mind to believe also he was there on their sufferance, if not their invitation; for there was his dream, sent for his guidance. Fevernager concealed a hot desire to be clear of the rock-bound aisle by simulating phlegmatic calm. Both Darby and Gorl were oppressed by a lively sense of something sinister about to happen; and often they caught their breath as a bit of rock rolled down the steep sides. Before they quit the pass the sun returned and overheard was stretched the bluest of blue skies.

When they emerged into warm sunlight each felt a great relief. Each believed danger had been left behind. Gorl, in particular, displayed high spirits and was almost boyish in his exuberant reaction.

Without pausing Baltimore led the way to a lodge-pole trail. This, he explained, ran north far beyond the spot he had in mind for their permanent camp. At the end of a few miles Gorl's high spirits deserted him. He was oppressed by the somber growth of tamarack, spruce and aspen clothing the low hills among which the lodge-pole trail wound. And back of the hills to complete the Easterner's depression were the lofty heights, smothered by dark pines.

"Don't we ever reach an opening where a man can take a full breath?" he suddenly inquired.

"By and by," encouraged Baltimore, his puzzled gaze lingering on Gorl's bowed head. He was recalling the dream and the fact his medicine had pictured three men riding back. He believed implicitly in what the Horsemen in the Cloud had guaranteed. Three men were to return to the white man's country. That must mean the chosen three would escape all harm even if they neglected to take any precautions. That much was Fate. As he looked at Gorl he was asking himself to name the fourth man, the man who would remain. It was for the safety of the fourth man he had taken much precaution in entering the hills. And yet he believed no amount of precaution could ward off the fourth man's fate.

They halted for an hour at a Dakota camp, a transient stopping place used only by those coming to the hills to cut new lodge-poles. Fevernager fingered his rifle nervously as deer, very tame, came close to the camp. Baltimore shook his head and said, "Not yet, old friend." Had he been logical in his superstitious beliefs no amount of gun-fire could hasten, or deter, what the dream had foretold.

It was past the noon hour when the trail took them around a low hill and to the entrance of what appeared to them to be a fairyland. Before them stretched an open park, picturesque and gracious. Its grassy hills piled up to the mountain ranges, and the latter reared high their heads and plumes of towering pines. The floor of the park was a green prairie, and the rich grass was dotted with the first summer flowers. Excellent water abounded and groves of timber dotted the whole expanse. It was too beautiful a land to be enshrouded by superstitious fears and to be avoided by its red owners. Nature had done everything for the Dakotas, but an idea from the first winter-count had robbed them of their heritage. The romantic grandeur framing the picture was the frown of a god resenting human intrusion. Back in the ancient times when the first red men began to wonder what it all meant there was initiated a species of god-seeking which attributed superhuman powers to animate and inanimate nature. And as a result this park, and many others, possessing all a pioneer could wish for, was taboo; and the owners lived remote and where even poles for their lodges could not be had.

Gorl emerged from his brooding mood, and with unexpected appreciation exclaimed, "I wouldn't ask for gold if I could live here undisturbed by the Indians!"

"It is a medicine place," said Baltimore. "But not to white men. They will live long enough to own this valley and other valleys in these hills. You spoke like a wise man. But what you see, woods, water, grass, and game, will not bring white men here. Gold. To get that they will dig up the ground, cut down the woods, drink whisky instead of water. And they will prey on each other and kill each other."

Fevernager readily agreed. "Of course. White men simply got to fight when they meet in a new spot. Mebbe it's the way the gods of the place git even with 'em for squatting in a *wakan* place."

"Always fighting. It's the white man's way. The Indian is ahead of him in that. There is no fighting in their villages. They have no printed laws. Their ponies and robes are safe. They have no locks, no keys. I learned many good things from the Dakotas. But let's be getting on. There are many richer diggings in these hills than those I'm taking you to. Up near the northern edge of the hills is a gulch that is very rich. It is deep down and covered with fallen timber."

"I'm for the richest spot!" quickly cried Darby.

"No. You must be satisfied with what I show you. The gold I shall lead you to is the finest in the world. The big veins of gold up north are not for us. Sometime machinery will be brought in and much gold taken out. But that will not be in our day."

If he had dreamed that, then his dream had deceived him. In less than ten years the rich lodes would be exposed, pursued deep in the ground and torn apart, and the hidden, northern gulch, filled with dead timber, would be known as Deadwood City.

Darby complained, "Indians won't use this country and they won't allow anyone else to use it."

"They must be foolish men," murmured Baltimore, his usually sober, dark eyes twinkling. "They really believe this land is theirs, to do with as they please."

Bird life was abundant. Songs were sung close to the trail and passing horsemen. Each small grove of timber was alive with feathered pioneers. Rocky Mountain bluebirds, robins and red shafted woodpeckers were solving their problems while keeping an eye on their evil manito, the hawk, circling the park. Gaunt dead pines were beautified by swallows in violet-green and martins dressed in purple. Buffalo-birds, of the bourgeoisie, flew up under the horses unafraid. Deer, elk and small herds of buffalo grazed in fat content, fortunate in finding a *wakan* place that red superstition had made a sanctuary.

Overhead floated a golden eagle, its wide circle always encompassing the four travelers. The skeletal remains of a buffalo were occasionally seen, with grass growing through the ribs and trying to eliminate this reminder of death. Along the edge of some timber the stealthy figure of a wolf was glimpsed. Darby's horse whinnied in fear and tried to bolt as a bear crashed into the nearest growth. What deeply interested the Southerner was the frequent sight of buffalo skulls. These were painted blue and red, in stripes and circles, and were arranged in rows and facing to the east.

Fevernager prophesied that the passing of the buffalo would end the tribal life of the Plains Indians, and under his breath he muttered a song, "A Buffalo said to me."

"You have no right to sing that," rebuked Baltimore. "It was given to a Dakota medicine man by a lodge of buffaloes. It is bad luck to sing another man's medicine song."

"No one understood but you," defended the plainsman, and feeling much abashed. "An' I only hummed it. Everyone knows th' buffler is worshipped along with the wind, the sun, the earth, an' water by the Hunkpapa an' other tribes at the White Buffler fest'val."

"It is bad medicine to sing another man's medicine song," insisted Baltimore.

This exchange between the two men sounded childish to Gorl and Darby; nor could they understand why the rebuke should be taken seriously by the plainsman. The four rode in silence for a mile; then Baltimore began to talk, telling those things which was fit for unbelievers to hear. He gravely explained they were traveling through the earthly abode of the sky gods when they deigned to visit earth for a bit. It was the resting place of the Thunderers, those wild Horsemen in the Cloud, who raced their colored chargers over the mountainous area. He more definitely informed them that the Black Hills, in white terms, occupied a huge oval about a hundred miles north and south and some sixty miles wide. The low mountain ranges cutting this had a general trend of northwest to southeast. Through the valleys, he explained, were trails extending from the North Platte to the Yellowstone and its many tributaries.

What persisted in Gorl's mind as being most ridiculous was the young man's seeming adherence to the superstitious fears which prevented the Dakota from making the rich park-lands their permanent abode. He already knew it was necessary for the villages in northern Nebraska to make tedious trips to the hills for lodge-poles. They visited, but would not tarry in, this land of plenty. Having an abundance of game, the best of water and grass, the owners were kept away by foolish fears.

"It is a medicine place. No man can live in a medicine place," patiently explained Baltimore. "Wakantanka, the great mystery, comes here to rest when he grows tired of the never-ending fight between the Thunderers and the Unktehi. The Indian believes this is the home of Wakantanka. They know his children are welcome here, when fleeing from great danger; to hunt, when the villages are hungry; to cut new poles for their lodges; to pass through in traveling to the Yellowstone and Big Horns. But they can build no villages here. They will say that big tree tells of a time when Wakantanka was angry." And he pointed to a huge Norway pine, blasted by lightning.

"Do you believe all that, Baltimore?" incredulously asked Gorl.

"The missionaries ask the Indian to believe things he thinks are foolish. I tell you some things the Indian believes. When their men are struck by lightning up here they say the men stayed too long."

"If you believed all that you wouldn't come here," insisted Gorl.

"We will not stay long."

Fevernager frowned at the Easterner and shook his head. Gorl took the hint and ceased his questions. But Baltimore was not offended: and he further said: "The years of my life spent among the Indians make me call it 'Wakantanka'. The white blood in me calls it God."

The last few miles of their twenty-five mile journey was under the leaden pall of towering clouds. The rim of mountains prevented their viewing the approach of the storm. The effect was much as if the thunder-caps were created on the crest of the range. The tired animals were urged on, for every wooded slope was a reminder of the god's wrath. The degree of punishment inflicted varied. One lofty tree displayed a straight, narrow groove from top to bottom and had suffered no apparent injury. Near by a tree was shattered to pieces, as though a giant ax-man had been at work.

Baltimore was more uneasy than were his companions as he studied the sky. The Thunderers had sent him and his friends to the hills; but either they had not given him immunity from storms, or else the presence of the fourth man was resented. The storm broke as they reached the creek and were hurriedly throwing up a shelter for the packs. For thirty minutes the electrical display was tremendous and so awe-inspiring that Gorl, for one, scarcely heeded the drenching rain. White spears were hurled repeatedly into the growth. The horses were frightened and were glad to crowd close to their owners. The burros grazed contentedly. The storm passed on and the transition from half-light to sunshine appeared to be almost instantaneous. The sun, standing on the western range, was as big as a shield and painted with vermilion.

Work was resumed, and the lean-to, quickly erected and covered with canvas, was the first white habitation on the site of Custer City, to be the first white town in the hills.

Finding his services were not needed, Gorl walked to the nearest slope and counted more than a dozen trees blasted by the storm. While these were not all victims of that storm they testified to the marksmanship of the gods, and their persistence in searching for an enemy in the growth. In pleasing contrast was the sprightly life of the place. Red and gray squirrels scampered about. A mule-deer noisily crashed forward until scenting the intruder and then raced silently away. A white-winged snow-bird, wandering from its home near a seven thousand foot peak (waiting to be named for General Harney), floated down like a small ghost and sadly frightened a flock of chickadees. A passenger pigeon, interrupting its interminable errand, picked the grove for a night's lodging.

Gorl in his aimless wandering came to a clutter of dead branches and fallen timber. In skirting this he suddenly came to a halt, and his jaw sagged and his eyes stared in frozen fear at what he beheld at the foot of a big pine. His brief paralysis ended. He yelled without knowing he did so, and grabbed for his gun. But he had left his belt and guns at the lean-to. Wheeling about he raced wildly down the slope, his warning cries alarming the camp. The three men snatched up their arms and ran to meet him. Darby carried a six-shooter in each hand while the plainsman and Baltimore had Henry repeaters. Gorl burst through the last of the growth and, on beholding his friends, screamed:

"Indians! *Indians!*"

The three men separated and Baltimore and Fevernager dropped to one knee and waited for something to shoot at. Darby remained erect, one gun half raised. Gorl came to them on the run and would have passed on to the creek to secure his guns had not the plainsman caught his arm and whirled him about. The old man snarled, "What's the row? What d'ye see?"

"Two Indians!" gasped Gorl. "Crouching behind some brush at the foot of a big tree! Just their heads showing. Only by chance I saw them. Light's poor. Let me go! Want to be killed?"

"No two Injuns can kill me," growled Fevernager. "But git along."

Baltimore ordered, "All of you go back to the creek. I will go and talk with them. They did not shoot. If Gorl's eyes didn't fool him they are scouts ahead of a band. They already have seen me and know I am their friend. Go back."

As his companions retreated to the lean-to he walked ahead, holding up his open hand, palm outward. He disappeared in the timber. His friends waited until fearful lest he had been killed by a blow, then advanced to learn what had happened. When they were half way to the growth Baltimore appeared, his rifle under his arm. He walked toward them slowly, his head bowed. Nor did he speak in answer to the anxious queries until he had joined them. Then he explained:

"It took some time to find the place. Gorl's eyes saw two Dakota men, but his eyes are weak, or he was afraid. The timber wolves found the two men before he did. They have been dead a long time. Both were killed by the same bolt of lightning, I think. There they sit lying against the tree, with only their heads showing, while their ghosts tell Wakantanka why they overstayed their time."

"Whew!" exclaimed Gorl. "When I see Indians I never stop to investigate. How often do these storms come?"

"One a day for weeks in some seasons. Keep away from trees when the spears begin to fly. There is light enough for Fevernager to shoot an antelope. I will make a fire. You men put the rocker together."

The rocker, knocked down, consisted of a small and a large box. The larger was two feet by four and would rest on the cradle, or rocker. It had a cleated bottom and an opening for the water to escape. The smaller box, about two feet square, would be placed on top and at one end of the big box. The small box had a wire sieve for a bottom. This was a decided improvement on panning, but inferior to a "long tom." The demand for secrecy and stealth limited the display of ingenuity.

The boxes were soon put together and secured to the rocker, and Gorl was impatient to commence hunting for gold. He wandered along the bank of the creek eagerly seeking indications of rich gravel. Had it been there the dusk would have prevented discovery. A gun cracked and Baltimore made the kettle ready for the meat. Then he called to Gorl and explained the real treasure house was locked up in lodes and could not be worked. He quite discouraged the two men by saying he had not planned to wash dirt from the creek but would depend upon dry gulch diggings half a mile back.

"You mean we've got to bring the dirt half a mile before we can wash it?" asked Gorl.

Baltimore nodded. "If that's the best we can do, that's what we'll do," surrendered Darby. "With the burros we ought to haul in quite a lot in a day."

Fevernager came in with the dressed carcass of an antelope, and the water was boiling. After the meat was cooked and the supper eaten a tent was pitched back of the lean-to and a program of work was decided upon. The plainsman was to act as hunter and lend a hand at the rocker. Gorl and Darby were to pack in the dirt. Baltimore was to scout and watch out for Indians from the surrounding heights. All cooking was to be done at night to avoid making a smoke.

Work was commenced with the first light and after Darby and Gorl had been over the half mile route once they needed no guide. Their enthusiasm was great as they brought in the first four burroloads of dirt. They were anxious to pause and watch the results of the first washing. Their partners insisted a large amount of dirt be accumulated as rapidly as possible. Gorl decided they could accomplish this by bringing bigger loads. It was then he and Darby learned something about the burro.

None of the four small creatures would take a step. "What'n hell's the matter with them?" angrily demanded Gorl. And he looked about for a stick.

Darby restrained him and tried an experiment and removed some of the dirt from the leader's load. The burro at once started along the trail to the creek. The others followed once their burden had been reduced. On the way to the hills the men had discovered some of the virtues the undersized pack-animals possessed. They had learned a burro would pick up a living where a horse, mule, or ox would die. They knew the patient animal was more surefooted than any other creature on hoofs. Now they had learned it was useless to overload, or to expect them to carry a suitable load unless it was evenly balanced. The more they studied the animal the more they admired him. Strung out in a line, and without guidance, they would carry the two hundred and fifty to three hundred pound loads to the creek.

Gorl confessed, "I'm getting quite humble from associating with them." This after the burros had refused to be annoyed by a terrific thunder storm. Nor was there any need of picketing them; for they were gregarious and approved of humans. Baltimore, in Teton, called them "little medicine dogs." After grazing their fill, they kept close to camp, not because they were timid but from the social instinct. Fevernager pretended to be much annoyed at their standing close behind him, patiently waiting for him to toss a flapjack over his shoulder.

The day Baltimore said they would wash the dirt was a holiday for the burros. Neither Southerner nor Easterner would miss the first result. Some eight tons of dirt awaited the rocker. After all this had been washed Fevernager and Baltimore announced the yield to be six ounces. Darby and Gorl were dissapointed. The former said:

"That's good wages, but nothing alarming. If we can pack in eight tons a day, and if it can be washed as fast as we bring it in, we'd be running about twenty dollars a day. If we were in a Colorado camp and could work an entire season we'd have about twenty-five hundred to show for our work, and would have to live out of that."

"I think we should do a great deal better, seeing that we risk our lives in coming here," said Gorl.

Baltimore was distressed. He explained, "I never called them five-ounce diggings. I'm not interested in gold mining. The big fortunes are in the lodes. Still I think that gulch will pan out much better. Our rocker lets the fine gold get away. There's no need of Fevernager staying out all day, to shoot what game we need. I'll cut down the time I spend scouting. We two will wash each day, when possible."

The plainsman cheerfully agreed to the new arrangement and worked well for half a day and then resumed his wide wanderings, ostensibly in search of game; in reality to satisfy his curiosity as to what he would see beyond the next ridge. It was the same curiosity that took the first plainsmen into far places and which ever prevented him from abiding long enough in a place to develop a gold mine. The activities of the trans-Mississippi fur trade never started a gold rush.

In defense of his defection Fevernager argued, "A little work is all right. But when a man hasn't more'n about so many days of life left in his old carcass it's a bodacious waste of sunshine to be breaking our back over that contraption. If th' Almighty wanted us to like to look at gold he wouldn't 'a' hid it under cover. It would be layin' 'round loose, like flowers, an' on top of ridges, 'stead of under ground."

Nor did Baltimore enjoy manual labor. He had lived too long in red villages not to be imbued with the belief a man's work is hunting and fighting. Gold to him meant nothing, as his wants were few. Shoveling dirt, lifting heavy bags, working at the rocker, quickly became obnoxious. None of his red friends were gold hunters. If it had not been for his dream he would not have brought the three men to the hills. Fevernager's idea of success in the venture was a moderate stake. Say enough to keep him in tobacco and whisky for a year; although he knew he would throw it all away in one carouse in the first roaring town he struck.

Gorl attempted to argue with him, but he philosophically insisted, "I can git just as drunk an' have just as much fun on three hundred dollers as on twenty thousand. You had lots of money when you came West; an' you blew it all."

Gorl reddened and made no reply. Darby quickly agreed, "I can't blame you for refusing to lame your back for my benefit. The burros are doing all they should. Gorl and I perhaps can do a little more. We'll let it go at that."

The Easterner bitterly complained, "At the rate we're going, and assuming we can stay here ten weeks undisturbed, we'd have a bit better than twelve hundred dollars apiece."

"An' you counted twelve hundred nothing to feed to th' tiger in Cheyenne," sympathized the plainsman.

"If we could only find a bar on the creek we could at least double our return."

Baltimore was much disturbed by this talk. He said nothing but walked from the camp and was not seen again until night. When he took his place at the fire and had glanced at each downcast face, he suddenly asked, "What would you two men be satisfied with? Or this way—would you be satisfied, Gorl, if you could have twenty thousand dollars in one day? Would you take that and not ask for more from these hills?"

"Yes, yes," eagerly cried the Rhode Island man, his eyes glittering. Then he paused for a moment and reflected. He slowly asked, "But if I can make that in one day why can't I stay and double it?"

Baltimore smiled grimly. "I knew it," he quietly declared. "Always more. That's what the white man wants. If you had more than you ever could eat and wear and drink you'd still want more. There is not enough gold in the world to satisfy the white man. He steps on the flowers without seeing them. He never stops to watch the clouds. After he dies he will be unhappy unless his ghost is finding ghost gold."

"Dakotas got better heads'n whites in lots of ways," shrilly insisted the old plainsman. "This West is a wonderful land. All you got to do is to smoke your pipe, shoot your dinner, laze 'round an' be happy. An' the whites, like what our friend says, keep their eyes shut to th' medicine-bow in th' sky after a storm. You two fellers only think 'bout specks of yaller stuff in dirt. That's all you reckon on gittin' out of life. If these hills was pure gold Gorl wouldn't be satisfied with one of 'em. He'd want all."

"But if it's to be found in such plenty what harm in taking all we can?" persisted Gorl. "Why fritter away time washing dirt for a poor return? We're here at the risk of our lives. Let's play for a big stake."

"What would you be satisfied with, Darby?" asked Baltimore.

"I'd be immensely pleased with five thousand dollars. With that I could go back to Louisiana and buy a small place. With ten thousand I could take life easier. The war tired me. I begin to feel like an old man."

"You carried the pipe over a long path,

and lost," mused Baltimore. "I heard the sound of hoofs in a dream last night. I feel the Horsemen in the Cloud are galloping nearer."

To make himself clear on another point Darby explained, "I get Gorl's point of view. Of course I'm keen to corral all the gold now I'm here."

Fevernager, very curious, urged, "Got something up your sleeve, younker? Spit it out."

Baltimore remained silent for a minute and appeared not to have heard the plainsman's prompting. He gazed steadily at the west, and they were believing he would not answer when he began, "Years ago white men came to these hills from a Mormon train. One got away. Before the Dakota found them they had dug much gold."

Gorl breathed heavily and thrust his bearded face close to the dark countenance of the speaker. Darby's eyes glittered and he pressed his lips tightly together to prevent the questions he was eager to ask.

"An' you know where it's cached!" broke in Fevernager. "Then let's git it an' have done with this cussed dirt washin' an' hustle back to th' towns for some fun."

"Dead men's bones are over it. Their ghosts watch it," muttered Baltimore uneasily. "Bad luck may follow the man who takes it. Strawberry Sam may have found his there. And he is dead. I took a pocket of nuggets, but threw them away in Cheyenne. It is bad luck to take the gold."

"These two fellers will risk bad luck if th' stuff comes hot from hell!" the plainsman exploded. "It'll be their risk, not mine, nor yours, Baltimore. I don't want any more'n what we've washed out here on th' crick. No place to keep it. They might as well suffer from havin' it, as to suffer for wantin' it. My idee of a good time is to scout these hills an' see what we can see."

"I have taken some of the gold once. I will take no more for myself," decided Baltimore. "My old friend is wise when he says he will not touch it. When you take gold in one hand you take trouble in the other. I believe there is more than sixty thousand dollars under the dead men's bones. You two can divide it."

Darby and Gorl stared at him with greedy eyes, but said no word. It seemed incredible that a man should know where gold was hidden, ready to be sacked, and hold back from it because of a silly superstition, or lack of desire. Baltimore stood up and stared thoughtfully at the eager faces for a moment, then left the camp and disappeared into the growth on the nearest slope.

Gorl huskily whispered, "Has he gone to get it?"

"You poor fool! Think he's goin' to pack in some two hundred pounds on his back?" countered Fevernager. "He's gone off to make medicine. If poor Strawberry Sam got his nuggets from that cache I wouldn't touch any of it with a hundred-foot pole."

"I'll gladly load myself down with it," said Darby. "I've had enough hard luck without gold. Bring on your bad luck if you only bring the gold."

Thirty-odd thousand dollars would be a fortune to the Easterner, who, a year back, would have estimated that sum as only a portion of his fortune. The wild hopes surging through each man's mind killed all desire to labor at hauling and washing dirt for week-wages. Gorl was frankly greedy. Darby endeavored to mask his greed, and to excuse himself by insisting:

"If it wasn't there, a gift to the first man to find and take it, I wouldn't feel so keen. But white men will swarm up here sometime to find gold. I'm ahead of the crowd and want my share. I never had any gold that hadn't passed through dead men's hands."

When Baltimore came in after dark the men were eager to learn his plans. Fevernager had warned them he might refuse to go after the cache because of some inhibition raised by his medicine. And he had warned them to ask no questions. Scarcely speaking, Baltimore ate his supper and turned in for the night. In the morning Gorl and the Southerner prepared to set out for the gulch with the patient burros, and not until they were about to start did Baltimore give definite information of his purpose. He abruptly called out:

"I need one of the burros. Do not follow me. Look for me when you see me."

He procured his horse and mounted and rode north, leading a burro. Darby and Gorl exchanged exultant smiles. Fevernager was morosely silent for a while. When he did speak it was in an attempt to dampen their joy; for he said, "Jest bear in mind it's dead men's gold you'll git."

They scarcely heard him. Gorl was striding impatiently up and down before the lean-to and loudly insisting they should repair to the dry gulch and pack in dirt as usual. As proof he had no idea of doing this he suddenly slumped down before graying coals and stared fixedly at the ground. Darby bustled about with nervous energy for a few minutes, then imitated Gorl in surrendering to the pleasant task of spending the gold. Fevernager left them and wandered on a sightseeing trip. At midday a violent thunderstorm swept the park. The Horsemen rode with unusual fury and hurled endless white-hot spears at their ancient enemies, the giant rattlesnake and prehistoric water monsters. Fevernager ran from the timber at the outbreak of the storm to escape the missiles now riddling the slopes. It required the efforts of the three men to restrain the horses from running away. The burros gave no trouble. The storm was of short duration but inflicted the usual amount of damage on the pines. An hour before sundown a second storm came from the east and raged furiously.

Fevernager remarked, "Reckon I'll make that high peak in th' north an' git up on the top an' watch how these storms look. They'll be below me. I always like to look down on a ring-snorter of a storm." His companions did not hear him.

On the next day Gorl and Darby simulated great gusto in packing in dirt from the gulch. They told each other that Baltimore might not find the secret cache. Each was wondering when Baltimore would return. His farewell speech had given no indication of the time he would require to make his journey. On the third day the two men frankly confessed they preferred washing dirt to traveling to the gulch and back. Did Baltimore return during their absence there would be so many precious minutes lost in starting back to the white man's country. Fevernager was away all day. He brought in antelope meat at dusk of the third day, and he disturbed his friends somewhat by announcing:

"Thought I see something that looked like smoke up north. Too far away to be sure."

"That means Indians!" exclaimed Gorl, his heart sinking.

"I said it looked a bit like smoke. Mebbe a fire set by lightning hitting dry underbrush. Mebbe mist rollin' off a ridge. So far off it was just a notion of mine, mebbe. I'll sneak out early after sunrise an' take a peek."

He slept soundly, but his companions remained awake several hours, dreading the possible coming of a band of Indians. The morning broke glorious with sunshine. With the first light Fevernager was high on a mountain. He returned as a late breakfast of beans and bacon was removed from the fire. Between hungry mouthfuls he reassured his companions by stating his failure to discover any signs. His spirits were unusually high. He had planned to explore the country north to the tall peak. He was confident he could get back ahead of Baltimore, and if he failed they could start for home and he would overtake them.

After he finished Gorl paused in eating and said, "Had a funny dream last night. Just came back to me. Seldom have dreams. But last night I was scared by the biggest rattlesnake a man ever saw."

The plainsman's half-raised knife slowly sank to the ground. There was something of dismay in his gaze as he stared at the speaker. In a low voice he asked, "Dreamt of a rattler?"

Gorl nodded and continued eating.

"Dreamt of old *Sintehla tanka,* the gran'pap of all rattlers?" continued the plainsman. "Dreamt of the enemy of the Thunderers? Well, I reckon you've done it now!"

Gorl blinked at him in amazement. Darby smothered an amused smile and explained, "He means it's unlucky to dream of rattlesnakes."

The Easterner laughed heartily. The plainsman curtly warned, "You'll be mighty lucky if you ain't laffin' out t'other side of your mouth mighty soon, mister. Don't you know there ain't nothin' unluckier to dream 'bout than a snake? You might as well paint a pony in th' *wakan* way when you don't have any right to do so. Why couldn't you dream of hawks, or even bears?"

"Can a man pick his dreams?" asked Gorl, still laughing. "Don't you know that dreams are just so much foolishness, the odds and ends of things you've seen, or talked about, all mixed up in a crazy pattern? Don't you know—" He ceased speaking and with slack jaw gaped wildly over the plainsman's head.

Darby glanced in that direction and hoarsely murmured, "Lord God be with us!"

Without moving a muscle the plainsman softly asked, "Injuns?"

Darby slowly inclined his head and continued staring at the seven Dakota men standing in a line, rifles in hand, their eyes blazing hatred at the intruders. The Southerner murmured, "Seven of them behind you."

Fevernager's eyes widened for a second and he quietly informed, "Now there's eight back of you. Came up out the grass like so many snakes."

Gorl sounded a hoarse cry and started to reach for his belt. The plainsman leaned forward and grabbed his wrist and gave it a violent twist. Then lifting his head he called out in the Teton dialect, "Friends, you behold us! A man led us here who has dreamed of the Horsemen in the Clouds. We have food. Come and eat."

He heard what Gorl and Darby were beholding, seven men advancing slowly behind him. He saw what neither of his companions saw or heard, eight Oglala Dakotas coming toward him. The two lines were stretching out to form a circle.

"Don't move a muscle," he softly warned his companions. "We're in for hell 'n' repeat. But we ain't dead yet."

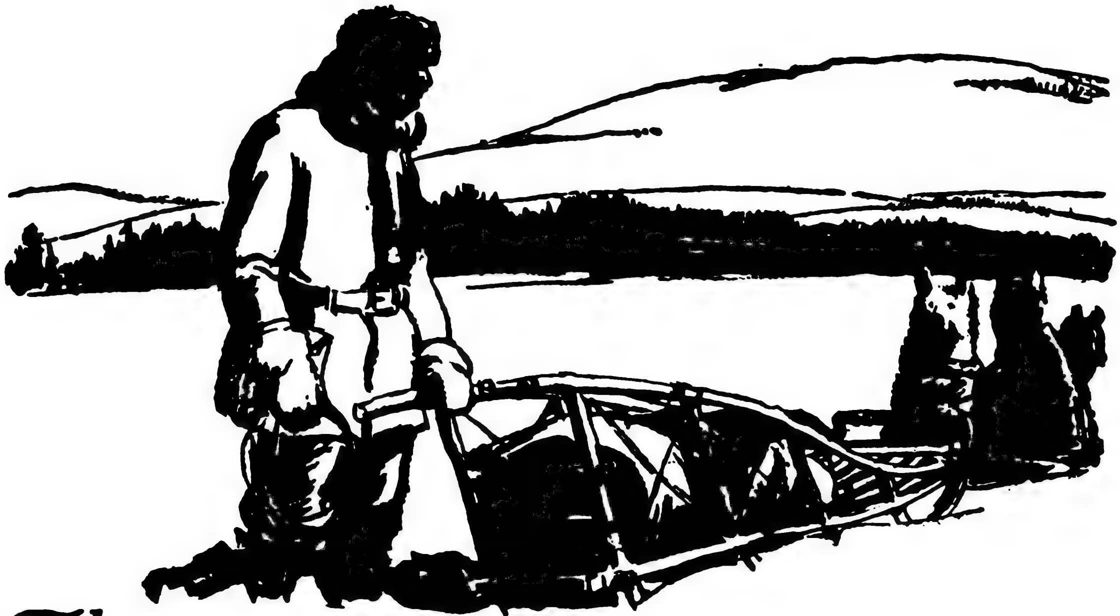
The circle was completed. The plainsman glanced up into one lowering face and was relieved to see the man was not painted for war. His robe, fallen from his shoulder and caught at the waist was decorated with red and black marks to advertise the man's generosity in that he had given away ten ponies. The plainsman told this man:

"*Kola,* our hearts are glad to see you. We came with a man who has had a *heyoka* dream. A man who calls you brothers. He will be here soon. A man who calls *Makhpia-sha,* father."

"The old man talks with a twisted tongue," broke in a harsh voice directly behind Fevernager. "He came here to find gold. He will find death."

At the sound of this voice the plainsman turned his head and stared up into the face of the speaker. "*Makhpia-sha!* Red Cloud, himself!" he feebly muttered.

In the chapters to come the Dakotas decide the fate of the white men; and Baltimore's dream reaches its fulfilment.



The Black Koulatang

A Tale of the Northland Law

By SEWELL PEASLEE WRIGHT

IT WAS cold. The wind was razor-edged with cold. The tortured fiber of the hemlocks cracked with cold. The sky was blue-gray, the color of fractured steel; even the sun was cold, like a colorless, misty circle of ice in the sky. Underneath Berkhead's webs the dry snow crisped, protesting the violation with mouselike squeaks.

The strip of fox that framed his face in the hood of his koulatang was white and bristling with hoar frost, and a patina of white was visible on the front of the parka, for he was sagging with utter weariness, head down on his chest, his lips cracked and blackened with the cold, the frames of his snowshoes clicking noisily as he stumbled on.

His dogs, following the half-obliterated trail that wound on and on through the bush ahead, were as tired as their master. Their muzzles were white with frost, and from time to time they gulped down hasty snatches of snow. Great tawny huskies, they were, their lips twisted in a perpetual snarl, with wolfish ears and muzzles, and broad, enduring chests. They were tired and hungry and savage, but they had the old pride that sometimes develops in a team of good dogs; they would not quit until their master ordered them to stop, or they dropped, with broken hearts, in their traces.

Berkhead, Constable Berkhead, of the Mounted, watched the laboring brutes, a spark of pity in his eyes. Keen, piercing eyes, usually; now dulled and lifeless with weariness.

"An hour more and we'll call it a day, pups," he croaked. "Keep it up, you mushing fools, and we'll come to the end of this trail in a couple of days!"

The dogs pricked up their ears at the sound of Berkhead's voice; Streak, the lead dog, glanced back inquiringly over her shoulder. The mounty grinned painfully, his lips stiff and cracking with the cold.

"Not yet, old lady!" he chuckled. "An hour yet before——"

The report of a rifle split open the silence with a crash like striking lightning. Something plucked at the shoulder of the great shaggy black parka, and Berkhead knew he had barely escaped death.

The policeman's tall, lean figure snapped erect like a suddenly released spring, and in one quick glance he mapped the terrain in his mind and decided on his next move. There was a fallen tree a few yards away, and its uplifted, sprawling roots promised shelter. The snaky black lash of his whip shot out, cracking viciously, and he snapped a word of command to the dogs. Instantly they swung from the trail they had been following, and followed Berkhead as he sped straight for the shelter of the upflung roots. Perhaps five seconds after the crack of the rifle Berkhead flung himself into the hollow behind the roots, his dogs crowding in closely about him, yapping and snarling with excitement, their breaths hanging like steam in the clear, icy air.

"Close call, that," mused Berkhead as he studied the silent bush, trying to locate the skulking shooter. "Back-trailed and laid for me. Didn't give Pete credit for that much brain. Which goes to show it doesn't pay to jump to conclusions."

Carefully he peered into the bush, but there was nothing except the waiting, eternal whiteness, the listening black hemlocks, and the long, fairy shadows on the white snow.

In his curiosity Berkhead exposed a little too much of his head, and the startled silence was split again with the crashing report of a rifle. A silvery white groove appeared in a great root close to the hood of the parka; something stung Berkhead on the lip, and hot, salty blood trickled across his lips.

The policeman smiled grimly and spat redly into the snow.

"Third time may be the charm, Pete," he mused, but the glance he cast at the heavy, battered old Webley in his hand was significant and thoughtful.

More cautiously he resumed his study of the country; he realized the necessity for locating the enemy, for while the roots and trunk of the fallen tree now formed a bulwark of safety, were the skulker to circle back through the woods, it would not be difficult to pot the policeman in the back. And Pete Jessup, with one killing already on his grimy hands, would not stop at another to save his skin.

The alert, searching gaze fixed suddenly; Berkhead had caught a glimpse of something moving behind a little, snow-covered hemlock. The policeman whipped out his glasses, trained and focused them carefully. The little tree leaped amazingly close under the magic influence of the big eight-power binoculars.

"Well — I'll — be—damned!" muttered Berkhead in little jerks of amazement.

Through the glasses he could make out quite plainly what had moved behind the little snowy hemlock. He could see bits of the loose, smooth-hanging, hair-seal koulatang and the heavy mackinaw breeches of the watcher. Could even make out parts, here and there, of the slim, wicked little high-power rifle that had twice spat hurrying death. At last he caught a fleeting glimpse of the skulker's face, and it was then he voiced his utter wonder.

The watcher was not Pete Jessup—it was Slim Barnes, Berkhead's best friend!

BERKHEAD dropped the binoculars and cupped both mittened hands around his mouth.

"Slim!" he shouted, "This is Berk! What the hell do you think you're doing?"

There was a sudden, startled movement behind the little hemlock, and Slim came running towards the fallen tree. Berkhead waded through the snow to meet him.

"My God, Berk, did I get you?" panted Slim, his face strangely white. "I—I thought you were Art Harriman!"

"You ought to be a little more careful," said Berkhead grimly. "And just who is this Harriman person anyway?"

Slim's white face twisted into a mask of unreasoning fury.

"Harriman?" he said slowly. "He's a man just about your build, and wears a black koulatang like yours. Says he is a fur buyer. He may be. But he didn't buy my fur. He *stole* it!"

"What?"

Slim nodded. "He robbed my cache of fur. I've been lucky this winter, Berk; damned lucky. I had three thousand worth of fur in that cache if I had a penny's worth. You know how bad I needed that money, with my wife sick ever since last spring, when the kid was born. And Harriman stole that fur." He cursed the thief in the deadly, monotonous, bitter voice of a man in whom the fire of vitality has burned so low that he has no heat left in him, even for cursing. "I started out on his trail. Two days ago I lost it in a storm. I've been circling ever since, trying to pick it up. When I saw you, I thought I had found not just his trail, but him."

"But you wanted to kill him," protested Berk.

"Yes," agreed Slim in his dead, tired voice. "Just as I shall kill him when I see him."

"That's murder, Slim!" said Berkhead sharply. "Snap out of it, man! Get your furs back, and bring this lad in; we'll do the rest. It's not for you to do the punishing, you know!"

Slim shook his head doggedly, and looked the policeman squarely in the eyes.

"He's robbed me of more than my furs," he said quietly in his monotonous voice. "If I don't get them back it'll mean—God, Berk, don't you understand? My wife's life hangs on the operation those furs will buy. And he knew it, damn him! He dropped in on me, ate with me, and like the fool I was, hungry to talk with someone—you know how it is out here in the bush—I told him all about it. He knew what he was doing to me when he took those furs, Berk. And when I see him I shall shoot him down like I would a thieving caracjou!"

There was a deadly, unchangeable, decisive quality in the last words. Berkhead knew what had happened to his friend. The terrible lonesomeness of the bush, the worry over his wife's condition, and the loss of the furs, had made Slim a little mad. A sharp, single furrow of anxiety appeared between Berkhead's frosty brows.

"You're all excited, Slim," he said soothingly. "Let's make camp here and talk things over. A good hot meal and some friendly advice may change your views a little. It's nearly night anyway, and I've been going pretty steadily for the last twenty-four hours. The dogs are all in, and so am I. What say?"

"Suits me," nodded Slim briefly, and the two set about the work of making camp. After the weary dogs had bolted down their food, and nested into the snow, the two men, comfortable and with their stomachs warmed and cheered with a hot meal, crouched beside the warmth of the fire and smoked.

"Now look here, Slim," suggested Berkhead. "I'm out after a bird that's wanted for murder. You saw his trail. In a day or two, nothing preventing, I'll have the bracelets on him. Sooner or later I'll get him, or somebody else will—you know the rep of the Service.

"You'd better come along with me. I've got grub enough, and I'll sure appreciate your company. It's been a long, hard trail. After we get Pete, we'll hustle him back outside, and then I'll come back with you and we'll round up this Harriman fellow, furs and all. Two of us will make short work of him; I'm a regular bloodhound of the law on a trail, you know! What do you say?"

"No," said Slim quietly, pulling on his pipe.

"Damn it all, Slim," flared Berkhead, "You've got to! You bump off this Harriman, crook or no crook, and it'll be murder. Don't you understand? Why, Slim, I myself would have to go out on your trail. We're old buddies. You can't do this."

"Can't help it." Slim shook his head doggedly, staring with unseeing eyes into the fire.

The policeman tried another angle of attack.

"How'll you know his trail when you see it?" he asked. "There are lots of trails through the bush. You're on a wild-goose chase, Slim!"

"I'll know his trail," replied Slim dully. "He has a very fast, narrow toboggan, and there's a hunk knocked out at the rear. Leaves little grooves in the snow. I can tell it."

Berkhead shrugged wearily; and gave up in despair.

"Sleep on it, Slim, and remember what I've said. You may feel different in the morning. I'm dog-tired; let's turn in."

Slim glanced at the policeman, a cunning gleam in his eyes.

"All right," he said. "Let's sleep on it."

Despite his weariness, his utter exhaustion, Berkhead did not go to sleep at once The problem that confronted him tortured his aching brain and denied him rest.

His plain duty was to go on after Pete. Pete was a murderer, the man he had been sent to get. He had been gaining on Pete; a day or two more and he would have him. Yet if he went, and left Slim, his old buddy might become a murderer also in the eyes of the law, and he, Berkhead, would have the job of bringing in the man he loved best in all the world.

He simply must make Slim see the light. Take him along by force, if necessary. Yes, that was the way out. Take him along . . . by force . . . make him come . . . save him . . .

The demands of his exhausted body at last conquered. He fell asleep.

IT WAS daylight when he awakened. He threw back the flap of his heavy rabbit-skin robe with a cheery shout.

"Rise and shine, Slim!" he called, and as the words left him he saw that the place where Slim had slept was vacant.

Gone! Slim was gone. Berkhead examined Slim's trail and found it had been made several hours before. His old buddy had saved him the agony of a decision; had taken things into his own hands. There was only one thing to do, now, and that was to go on—after Pete.

And in the meantime—there was a haunted look in the policeman's eyes as the full realization of it swept home to him—Slim would become a man wanted for murder.

There were harsh, savage lines about Berkhead's mouth. Never, in all his years with the Force had he felt the blood-lust as he felt it now. He was possessed of a personal, unreasoning hate for Pete, and he pressed his dogs as he had never pressed them before. All that day and most of the next night he kept on the trail, and thanked God for the moon and the clear sky that made it possible to lengthen the hours of his work. During the hour or so of forced rest between the setting of the sun and the rising of the moon he had eaten, and fed the dogs very sparingly.

Shortly before the moon went down, utter weariness brought him to a halt. He made no camp; merely unhitched the dogs and rolled himself up in his sleeping robe. By sunup he was on his way again, driving his aching muscles and his snarling dogs with a savageness which was born of worry and hate and desperation.

Shortly before noon he saw ahead a sight that caused his heart to leap a little faster. A new trail swung out of the bush and merged with the one Berkhead was following. When he came closer and examined the strange trail, he gave vent to a sharp, exultant oath.

The trail was fresh, and in the soft snow Berkhead could see plainly it had been made by a very narrow toboggan, with a ragged section broken from the rear end, for there were two zigzagging grooves in the soft snow behind.

"Two birds with one stone," he muttered triumphantly. "That's Harriman's trail. He's following Pete's trail to make better time—and now I'm between Slim and the man he wants to murder. The luck o' the Mounties!"

Exultantly he hurried on. The trail, packed now by the passage of two teams, was firmer and faster, and the policeman's dogs made better time.

From time to time Berkhead stopped to examine the trail, and each time the grim smile around his lips grew a trifle grimmer.

"By night I'll have you—both of you!" he chuckled to himself.

About the middle of the afternoon the trail ahead became so fresh that Berkhead was afraid to proceed with his dogs. At the critical moment they might bark a challenge to the other dogs, and thus spoil his chance of a surprise.

He tied the dogs and hurried on, his small, light trail-shoes silent and quick on the trail. For perhaps an hour he sped along the trail, and just as the first dimness of dusk began to settle down over the bush, he spied the figure of the man with the narrow toboggan that left the two little zigzag furrows in the trail; a man with a shaggy black parka, who was running along behind his toboggan, tail rope wrapped around his mittened left hand, his long black dog whip lashing out every few seconds.

Berkhead was glad he had not brought his dogs, for the man ahead was a scant hundred yards away. The policeman had swung around a sharp bend in the trail, and there, in plain sight, was Harriman.

Berkhead waited a moment until another bend of the trail hid the musher from sight, and then, more cautiously, he went on, leaving the trail and cutting through the bush roughly parallel to the trail.

When next he caught sight of Harriman, the latter was going downhill, and Berkhead was on the very brow of the hill, concealed by a clump of small evergreens. The distance between them had not changed noticeably.

AS THE policeman watched, not daring to come closer for fear Harriman might turn around and see him, Berkhead saw something brown move behind a huge boulder some fifty yards ahead of Harriman. For an instant he thought it might be some animal, and then, sharply outlined against the whiteness of the snow, he saw the thing that moved was a man—with an aimed rifle in his hands!

From where Berkhead stood, looking down, he could see the crouching figure of the man plainly, but he knew that Harriman, further down the hill, would not be able to see the skulker at all.

For a split second the policeman stood motionless, and then he hastily cupped his hands around his mouth, to shout a warning.

Before the sound cleared his throat, however, the rifle crashed through the silence, and Harriman stumbled in his tracks. The jerk of the tail-rope twisted around his mittened hand threw him forward on his face, and he fell, writhing, in the trail. His dogs stopped, and looked around. For a few seconds Harriman twitched on the snow, and then he lay very still.

"God!" whispered Berkhead softly. "That was Pete behind the rock, and he made the same mistake Slim did!"

Pete waited a moment behind the shelter of his rock, and then, gun pointed cautiously, he crept up on the still figure in the snow.

Berkhead remained inactive no longer. With a quick glance around he decided on a course of action.

Swinging still further out into the bush, his small trail-shoes sinking and loading badly in the fluffy snow, Berkhead at last gained his objective, a point a few yards from where Harriman's body lay. Carefully, he parted the boughs of a small hemlock and peered through.

Pete had turned Harriman over on his back, and evidently realized he had made a mistake, for he was gazing down at the body, frowning. He glanced back along the trail, fearfully, and then back at the body. Evidently deciding at last to make the best of it, he leaned his rifle up against Harriman's loaded toboggan and dragged the body into the bush, out of sight; with a fan broken from a tree nearby, he roughly covered up the signs of his work. The bloody snow he trampled down, covering it with fresh snow. Then, with hasty, nervous glances back along the trail, he started undoing the lashing rope of Harriman's toboggan.

Berkhead stepped through his screen of trees, his heavy, ugly Webley ready and cocked.

"You're through, Pete," he said sharply. "Stick 'em up—quick!"

Pete whirled, reached for his rifle, saw the menacing muzzle of the Webley come down on him, and changed his mind. Slowly he straightened up and elevated his hands. He said nothing, but his round black eyes glittered like the eyes of a cornered rat.

Berkhead came closer, and reached in his pocket with his left hand for the bracelets. On the instant Pete took a desperate chance and leaped forward. Once the handcuffs were on him, he knew there was no hope—for Canadian justice is swift, sure, and merciless.

The policeman fired instinctively, but Pete's unexpected move saved him. Before Berkhead could fire again, Pete was upon him, fighting like a trapped wildcat.

Ordinarily Berkhead and the breed would have been evenly matched; as it was, weary and exhausted by three days of forced marching, with very little sleep, the policeman's muscles refused to respond with full strength and quickness.

Over and over they rolled in the snow, fighting as the beasts fight, silently, with lips drawn back over clenched teeth, their breath steaming in the icy air.

With chin, elbows, fists, knees and teeth they fought; bunting, gouging, pounding, straining, rending, until their muscles crackled with the effort.

Rolling madly in the snow, they lodged against the icy trunk of a tree. Desperately, Berkhead managed to struggle to a sitting position. Pete raised himself also. Still locked in that deadly embrace they struggled to their feet.

Pete swung a short, wicked blow to the pit of the policeman's stomach. Berkhead grunted; instinctively doubled up. Pete seized the advantage in the flicker of an eye; threw his entire weight against Berkhead, and the two went crashing to the ground.

With a world-shattering crack the back of the policeman's head struck a huge frozen root just below the surface of the snow. There was an explosion of red and blue flame before his eyes; he had a momentary impression of beady black eyes gleaming triumphantly, snagged brown teeth bared in a vicious snarl, and then he whirled away into blackness and silence.

WHEN Berkhead recovered consciousness, his first sensation was of intense cold. Next he became aware that his hands and feet were tied. He opened his eyes.

He likewise had been dragged from the trail. He had been stripped of his parka, his hands tied behind him, his feet lashed together. Over him stood Pete, grinning his brown, snagged grin.

"Theese tam you have meet a bettair man, *non?*" he chuckled. "Pete, he mak' no mistak' in a tak' a chance wit' you, *hein?* You beeg, but you not a gud fightair, M'sieu' the Red Coat." The smile left his face, and sudden hate flared up in his round, beady eyes.

"You would take Pete, so?" he snarled. "Well, you have meet a bettair man. You go no more on the trail, M'sieu'! You stay here, *oui,* while the cold freeze you, as your coming has freeze the blood of so many good men, *non?* I t'ink eet weel do you good, to lay there an' theenk and freeze, M'sieu', and remembair that your warm koulatang is on the back of Pete, the man you come to get! I am going now, Red Coat. It mak' me ver' happy to know that the cold get you, oh, so slowly, M'sieu', and the wolves come and finish the job. That ees a beautiful thought, ees eet not, M'sieu'?"

Berkhead looked up at him with calm, curious eyes, but said nothing. Rather uneasily, Pete turned away, picked up Berkhead's shaggy black parka, and pulled it on over his ragged mackinaw. Then with a last triumphant smile, he strode away through the gathering gloom.

Berkhead watched him go, working at his bonds. The breed had tied him tight, however, with strong rawhide that was already frozen as rigidly as iron wire. The bonds cut into his flesh until he could feel the hot blood run, but he made no progress.

The cold was beginning to sink in through the scarlet tunic; it penetrated numbingly. Hands and feet denied the circulation of warm blood by the tightness of the rawhide lashings, were almost without sensation already. "God, what a death!" thought Berkhead and groaned.

By an effort he lifted up his head and watched Pete. He had just reached the toboggan, and was wrapping the tail-rope around his hand. He gave the long dog whip a preliminary flicker and turned to look back at Berkhead.

Berkhead choked back the human temptation to call out for mercy. He would not give the breed that much satisfaction. Wearily he let his head fall back into the snow. As he did so, there was the sudden crack of a rifle.

Galvanically, Berkhead jerked up his head, startled hope in his eyes.

Pete was swaying on his feet, and running towards him was Slim!

"That," remarked Berkhead to himself in a peculiarly emotionless voice, "is twice that Slim's been careless." Somehow the words struck him as funny, and he burst into laughter. As he looked, Pete crumpled up in the snow, on the identical spot where Harriman had fallen less than an hour ago.

"Slim!" called Berkhead weakly. "Oh, Slim!"

Slim paused, gave a hasty glance at the man in the trail, and then came running through the dusk towards Berkhead.

"God!" he muttered as he saw the policeman. "What's happened to you? I—I've shot the wrong man, Berk! He's out there in the trail. I was sure it was Harriman. I ran into his trail a few minutes back—couldn't mistake the trail. That was his toboggan there. It was a black koulatang like his, too. But it—it isn't Harriman, Berk. Who—who is he?"

"Cut these damned thongs and build me a fire," said Berkhead, "And I'll tell you all about it. But I don't think you made much of a mistake in killing him. That was the man I was after. He ambushed and killed your friend Harriman right on that very spot a half hour or so ago. I imagine you'll find your cache of fur all okay on that toboggan."

"Then—I'll not be wanted for the killing?" asked Slim hesitantly as he put his knife away.

Berkhead looked up from his work of rubbing hands and feet with snow, and a grim, grim smile lit up his features for a moment.

"I think we'll patch it up all right, under the circumstances," he said thoughtfully.

The Rise of the OUTCASTS

By

RAYMOND S. SPEARS

THE West is full of conspicuous examples of the first being last and the last first. Those humans who make of life a race to beat the other fellows have, out in the wastelands, been amazed at the upsets in form. The heroes are the cops of the desert, not the governors or congressmen. And a desert rummy with a cactus flower in his hatband—which may be a rattlesnake skin—attracts more attention along the trail than a private car full of millionaires. The phenomena of regional tastes in heroes may well be studied.

Billy the Kid and Pat Garrett dominate the Southwest. The cowboy is the universal hero. Wild Bill Hickok stands supreme in his own vivid scope. We know why the reputable citizens crowned Plummer and Slade with famous lynchings, yet we wish their beautiful wives could have had a less bitter culmination to their romances. When we can think of the name of no general, no government scientist, and no other appointed leader, Kit Carson the Indian scout looms the embodiment of an insistent tone ringing across the prairies and through the Rockies. General Custer, for all his faults or because of them, stands glorious in defeat—perhaps ending his life with his own last bullet at his last stand. And despite histories and records as to the actual physical command of the victorious Sioux, the public recognizes the spiritual mastery of Old Sitting Bull, the medicine man. The West is prone occasionally to give the palm to moral domain, rather than physical.

To call the roll of the heroes of the West leads us into realms of delightful speculation.

Sympathy with understanding . . . Only lately have we attained to a degree of knowledge about the work of detectives who made the West safe for property. Twenty or so years ago a man named Charley Siringo wrote a paper-back book about his life as a cowboy. And this ten cent fact story had a great sale. Then he wrote a book about his work as a cowboy detective. Collectors of Westerns read its frank and amazing anecdotes with new feelings as regards the spies and traitors of society. Siringo told with naive sincerity just how he worked, through whom and to what ends. He went into the dens of outlaws; he turned his back on an utterly vicious youth who suspected him of treachery and would kill for sport, too; he represented industry in a deadliest of labor-capital clinches in a mine strike; he hunted stolen cattle by riding with the rustlers and he linked arms with high graders, mine salters, murderers and bandits; he strolled up a cañon not knowing his quarry, Harvey Logan, was waiting in ambush to kill him —paused, and turned back just out of gunshot while a prospector across the way watched that terrific suspense of drama in real life.

Just so, when we learn the truth of men and occupations, we find points for admiration and understanding and sympathy. Surely the law enforcers have, in their taking of desperate chances, the same right to popular renown as the violators. But a curious quirk prevents this. The odds against the criminal are so great that it may be a hundred sheriffs, detectives, marshals and police are ranged against one small band, as the James, or Jennings or Wild Bunch outfits. The desperado has always been more noted than the cool hunters who brought them to bay and to the records of the courts or cemeteries. At the same time, Siringo's recognition is worth watching in its development as a significant bit of Westernism.

A Complete Novelette

Jungle SECRET

A Story of Love and Courage and the Still, Dark Menace of the Malay Jungle

By

T. T. FLYNN

HALL kicked back his chair and stood up abruptly.

"We deal from the top of the deck, not the bottom!" he said icily to Wicks.

The four of them were alone in the room. Hall, thin, wiry, his face darkened by fifteen years of fierce Malayan suns, yet still retaining a youthful look that could be positively boyish at times.

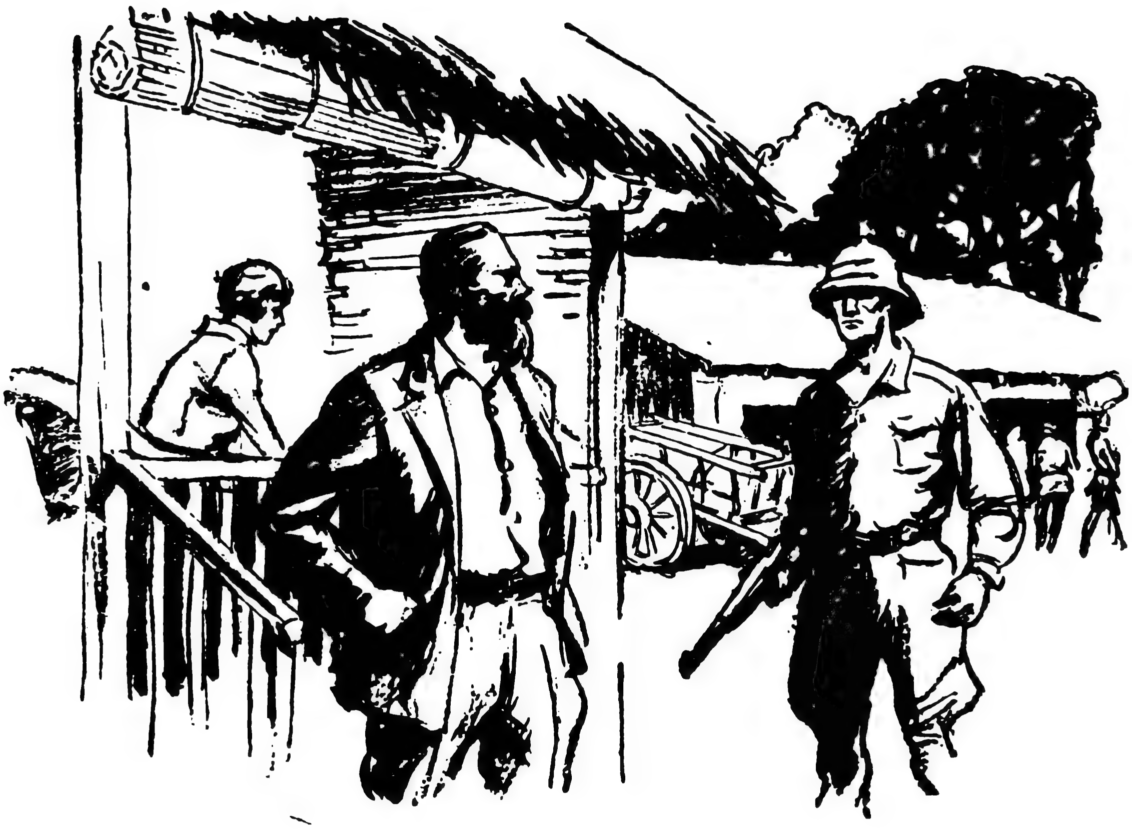
Macintosh, his partner, Scotch as Aberdeen, long body, long face, dour, silent—and keen. It was Macintosh who watched the business end of their rubber plantation. Watched it well too, Mac had, ploughing the profits cannily back, clearing, planting, buying better equipment, until they had come up out of the shoestring class into something worth while. Nothing to go wild over, of course. There had been lean years, when rubber hardly paid for the tapping. And thousands of younger trees had not come into bearing yet. That's where rubber gets you. Takes your brass to pay for clearing, planting and so forth —and then leaves you up in the air for six years or so until the trees grow to tapping size, say six inches in diameter, measured three feet from the ground. Not a get-rich-quick game; but money in it at times.

So with Hall and Macintosh. Twelve grim years of the jungle, the heat, the rains, the insects, one thing after another. Then the offer of purchase from Devonshire Plantations, Limited, who owned huge properties just upriver from them.

This meeting was the outcome. Langsdorff, who really was the Devonshire, lock, stock, and barrel, was out from London. He sat across the table now, his soft, full-fed form bulking large, the great brown beard that swept his chest hiding the expression on his meaty face. The cards in his fleshy fingers were motionless. Only his eyes moved, from Hall to Wicks, his plantation manager, and then back to Hall again.

Wicks' tanned face flamed. His thin lips pressed tight. But his eyes, that gave a hint of weakness to an otherwise ruthless mask of a face, shifted slightly before the boring contempt in Hall's gaze. Nothing boyish about Hall at that moment.

And then Wicks threw the pack of cards to the floor and sprang up also, knocking his *stengeh* over as he did so. The glass rolled to the edge of the table, whisky



spilling out, and tinkled to bits on the floor, unnoticed.

"Damn you!" Wicks demanded thickly. "What d'you mean by that?"

"I mean," Hall told him coldly, "that you're a bloody bounder. You dealt me this deuce off the bottom of the pack."

Wicks made a funny little sound in his throat. His eyes flashed to Langsdorff. That man was stupefied with amazement, staring at Hall. A man of dollars, craft, and good food. Not much in a situation like this.

Wicks did the only thing he could.

"You lie!" he whipped out, and swung wildly across the table.

Hall had been expecting it. He moved back a trifle. The fist swept past his face. And then Hall slipped forward again and let Wicks have a nasty hook to the side of the jaw. It was easy, since the force of Wicks' swing carried his shoulders over the table.

The burly manager of Langsdorff's great plantation went out cleanly. He collapsed toward Macintosh, his left hand scattering the chips in front of him.

Mac put out a charitable arm and eased the downward progress somewhat. But he let Wicks go clear to the floor and stay there; didn't even give him another glance.

"I say——" Langsdorff gasped through his beard, and dropped his cards.

"You needn't!" Hall told him shortly, rubbing his right knuckle where the skin had broken. "I'll do all the saying. Your man's crooked. I've suspected it, but never had a chance to prove it till he tried his cheap card tricks tonight. You may be crooked, too. I don't know. You've been lying about why you want our plantation."

Langsdorff ran his fingers through his beard. His eyes suddenly narrowed.

"Wicks has been a faithful manager. You did not prove he cheated. What is this about your plantation?"

"You don't get it!" Hall said coldly, and turned away from the table.

"You won't sell?" Langsdorff asked quickly, his wits about him once more.

"No!" Hall threw over his shoulder.

"I will go a thousand pounds higher," Langsdorff offered from the depths of his beard.

Hall walked to the door without looking around.

Macintosh arose without a word and followed him.

OUTSIDE the Devonshire Plantation bungalow darkness lay like a black blanket. Behind Hall and Macintosh the lights of the bungalow grew faint. The jungle night enveloped them. Great fireflies flashed on every side. Droning beetles and buzzing insects filled the air. From the river bank off on their right the hoarse *onk-onk-onk* of great frogs boomed steadily.

Hall lighted the way with a small pocket-flash. They were following a road that paralleled the river bank roughly running fairly straight between close-planted rubber trees. Hall strode on in silence, picking out the path with the flashlight beam, and now and then throwing it off to one side searchingly.

Macintosh spoke first, when a turn in the road had wiped out the lights of the bungalow behind them.

"A clumsy man with the cards, I'm thinkin'," he observed. "Three times I marked him before you did. 'Tis smart he must think he is with them, to try tricks like that today."

Hall turned his head and asked, "Three times before I caught him? Why didn't you say something?"

"Ah, weel, the poker was not the issue," Macintosh answered slowly. "If we could sell for our price, a quid or so loss on the cards wouldna matter."

Hall chuckled and dropped back so that the two of them were walking abreast.

"Always thinking about the dollars, aren't you, Mac?"

"I'm not denyin' business is business."

"But not with a bounder like that! And I'll bet Langsdorff is as bad as he is. They got us there in their bungalow and tried to pull the wool over our eyes."

"The drinks were free, laddie. An' we might 'a' got our price."

"Might not have, too," Hall said with conviction. "Langsdorff hadn't shown many signs of going that high."

"Ah, weel, 'tis done now," Mac said, and his long face grew grave in the darkness, and he took a deep breath that might have been part sigh.

Another silence fell over them.

Hall broke it this time.

"I—I'm sorry, Mac. I know you were counting on getting enough from this deal to go home and retire. All my fault. Always did smash things up with my temper. When I saw that deuce come off the bottom of the pack, I couldn't think of anything but what a swine Wicks was. I—I'll go back and apologize if you want me to. You've been too good a partner to disappoint."

"M-m-m."

Hall said after a moment, "How about it? I'll go right back if you say so."

"Wicks is a swine," Macintosh said slowly. "If he cheats at cards, he will cheat at business. I have na doubt you are right. About Langsdorff too. The reason he gave for wanting our plantation was a rum one. They do very well, even if they do have to haul a mile down this road to get past the rapids, and then ship from our land. They bought the right of way before the estate was laid out. It seems to work."

"Why should Langsdorff want to buy us out then? Why not get more land upriver, and clear and plant?"

"M-m-m."

"Why?" Hall insisted after a moment.

"By me," Macintosh admitted. "But if Langsdorff has the brass, he's got a right to any funny ideas he wants. He'd be getting a good thing. When all our trees are tapped, there'll be something. And we've the big tract at the back that's never been cleared yet."

This time it was Hall who sighed slightly.

"It's been a long, hard pull, Mac."

Macintosh reached out in the darkness and dropped a hand on the arm of his partner.

"We're over the worst, laddie," he said slowly. "When Langsdorff sent word that he'd like to talk buying, I thought we might get out now, comfortably. But 'tis na matter. A few years more, eh?"

"Right." And the subject was dropped. They walked on to their own modest bungalow and turned in with few words.

IT WAS the next morning at eight. Hall was at the drying sheds, inspecting rubber sheets that were ready for shipment downriver. A lanky Tamil contract laborer, black body naked save for a white loincloth, burst in at the door.

"Ai sahib!" he cried. "Come quickly!"

Hall whirled around and demanded curtly, "What's the matter?"

"Mac'tosh Sahib has trouble!"

Hall waited for no more. One glance

at the man's face showed plainly that something had happened. Hall ran outside after the Tamil. The man pointed a lean arm.

Hall looked.

Three men were coming through the hevea trees. Two Tamils, and between them, Macintosh. The Tamils were supporting Mac. He drooped limply, dragging his steps heavily.

Without ceremony Hall ran as fast as he could put feet to the ground.

Macintosh smiled weakly as his partner came up.

"All right, laddie. I am na dead. Have na fear."

Mac's voice was weak. His appearance belied his words. His long face was drawn with pain. The right side was a smear of dark, dried blood. The right shoulder of his khaki shirt was stiff and dark also with blood.

"What's the matter?" Hall asked in amazement. "What's all the blood from?"

Mac managed to smile again.

"Bullet wounds," he said weakly.

"Bullet wounds? Who fired them? How did it happen?"

Mac managed to smile again.

"Don't know," he said. "Talk about it later. Want to get in bed. Want water. Never was so thirsty in my life." His left eyelid drooped in a slight wink.

Hall saw, heeded the hint.

"I'll go ahead and get things ready," he stated, and ran towards the bungalow.

Ensued twenty minutes of whirlwind action. Sing Foo, the wizened Chinese cook, had warm water a few minutes after Macintosh was eased down on his narrow bed. Mac got his drink. And then lay in silence while Hall went to work with wet gauze and the warm water.

A nasty wound had been plowed in the right side of the scalp, scarring the bone, but not fracturing it. A second bullet had drilled all the way through the right shoulder, evidently splintering some of the bone.

Hall worked with the skill of one who had for years lived out of reach of doctors. Both wounds had bled freely and then clotted. He cleaned them out and used iodine liberally.

Mac squinted his eyes at the bite of the antiseptic in his shoulder.

"Sorry," Hall said. "Best I can do, Mac. Have to use it."

"Na mind me," Mac said gamely.

Hall did not, seeing that it was for Mac's welfare. He sent Sing Foo out of the room and talked while he worked. "Tell me about it, Mac."

"Na much to tell," Mac said slowly, squinting his eyes again as Hall swabbed iodine deep into the shoulder wound. "I took a look around some of the cups to see how the flow was coming on, and then walked out to the last planting to see if there were any signs of disease. I was near the edge of the clearing when someone shot from the jungle. It got the shoulder. Before I knew what was what the beggar shot again. Got my head that time. I didn't know it though. Things went black. I went down. Was out some time I guess. Must have bled a lot. Blood all over the ground when I came to. I was pretty weak, but got up an' started for the bungalow. One of the men saw me an' called another. They helped me in."

"See anything of the fellow who shot you?"

"Na. He must have thought I was finished, when I went down and stayed there. He got away in a hurry, I guess."

Hall bent down and took a roll of gauze from the medicine chest that Sing Foo had brought to the side of the bed.

"No doubt who did it," he said through his teeth.

Their eyes met when Hall straightened up. Mac grinned wanly.

"Well, I didna see him," he said. "I canna say."

"I can!" Hall said viciously. "No one but Wicks would have done it. I'll attend to him."

"Now," Mac protested feebly, "ye can prove nothing from what happened. 'Tis useless to plunge in without more to go on. We will see."

"Yes. We will see," Hall agreed, tearing off a length of the bandage with a jerk.

He bandaged Mac's head and shoulder, gave him a stiff drink, and then tried to pack him off downriver to the doctor.

Mac refused stubbornly. "Be all right. No use going away down to Kuala Pedang. The shoulder will come out all right."

Hall knew his partner, read him right this time, and gave in. The more Mac was opposed, the more stubborn he grew. Hall called Sing Foo in and gave him strict orders to hover over Mac and carry out his slightest wish at once.

Mac turned his head and stared quizzically.

"Going out?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Where?"

"Oh, look—see around. Be back long before tiffin. Rest easy." Hall turned toward the door.

"Laddie?"

"Yes?" Hall stopped in the doorway.

"Do nathing rash."

"No. Go to sleep." Hall closed the door behind him.

WHEN the blood of a man of action runs hot within him, he usually does not hesitate. Hall did not. With long, determined strides he took the narrow road that led upriver way to the Devonshire plantation.

The morning sun strained through the subdued green foliage of the hevea trees and cast dappled patterns on the ground beneath. Each tree had a little white china cup fastened at the bottom of the V-shaped scar where the bark had been cut away, and into each cup milky latex was slowly seeping from the cuts. Now and then a Tamil laborer moved into sight back in the serried ranks of trees.

Hall noticed neither the sun, the trees, nor the laborers. His eyes stared grimly ahead, and his jaw was set. Now and then his fists bunched tightly in reaction to the seething thoughts within.

So he came to the wide-verandaed bungalow that he and Mac had left behind the night before.

Neither the burly figure of Wicks, nor the bearded Langsdorff was in sight. Hall took the front steps two at a time, crossed the veranda, and pounded loudly on the door screen.

A couch creaked. Steps crossed the floor.

Hall stood tensely by the side of the door, his right fist clenched, his eyes two slits.

The steps reached the door. The screen opened.

Hall stepped forward quickly—and then stopped abruptly, his jaw dropping in astonishment.

In the doorway, looking at him inquiringly, was a young woman. Dressed in white, she was. Her hair was cut short, slightly boyish in style, giving her an air of youthful poise. In silence she waited.

Hall swallowed, and his fist went limp. He hastily doffed the planter's hat of gray felt that was on his head. Directly after, he recovered his poise, and his jaw went stern again.

"I am Hall, of the next estate," he told her bluntly. "I want to see Wicks."

"I am sorry. Wicks is not here just now."

Her voice was cool, her gaze frankly estimating. Hall felt suddenly that here was a girl who could stand on her own two feet in any situation. But he did not let that thought interfere with the purpose that had brought him there.

"Langsdorff then," he said shortly.

"My father is out also."

Langsdorff was her father then—not husband. She had not been mentioned the evening before. Hall was conscious of a little feeling of relief over the discovery, even as he queried, "Where can I find Wicks?"

She shook her head.

"I can't tell you exactly. He and father went out early this morning to inspect the upper part of the estate. They didn't say when they would come back."

Wicks out all morning with Langsdorff, inspecting the upper part of the estate. That would be in the opposite direction from the spot where Macintosh was shot. The two estates lay side by side along the bank of the small river, and the Devonshire was the upper. Wicks and Langsdorff on the upper side. Mac shot from the lower. They must be working together then, unless Wicks had left Langsdorff on some pretext.

One thing certain: The guilt lay between them. Wicks alone, or the two of them together. Neither Hall nor Mac had had a moment's trouble with any other person since they had opened their estate. Not even the natives. It suddenly occurred to Hall that there might be more to it than revenge by Wicks. Langsdorff wanted to buy the plantation. What better way to put it on the market than to kill one of the owners—or both?

Raw reasoning—yet back on the cot lay Macintosh. Good old Mac, who had been all a friend and partner could ever be, and whose shoulder was shattered, and life saved only by the thickness of the bone in his skull. A quarter of an inch lower and Mac would not have staggered to his feet after an interval of blackness. The Tamils would have found him there at the edge of the jungle—if some creature of the thickets had not reached him first.

"Did they intend to do any hunting? Either one take a gun along?" Hall asked carelessly.

"I don't think so. I saw no gun when they went, and father said nothing about it." Her eyes were frankly curious now.

Hall said curtly: "Thank you. I'll walk the way they went. Perhaps I can find them." He turned away, clapped his sun helmet on his head, and left her. And he had the feeling as he walked down the front steps that her cool gaze was still estimating him.

When there is hidden purpose important enough to involve cold-planned murder, it behooves the most prudent to walk carefully. Hall sought Wicks and Langsdorff alertly, intent now on seeing whether they were at the upper end of the estate.

HALF an hour's brisk walking produced no sign of Wicks or Langsdorff. Hall came to the upriver end of the Devonshire estate, and turned his steps back and away from the river.

A little later he caught sight of three figures off through the trees. Wicks, Langsdorff, and another. Hall went toward them. As he came nearer he saw that the third man was Deboer, a plump, oily Eurasian clerk. Deboer had been fathered by a Dutchman and mothered by a Chinese. Wide cheek bones and slightly slanting eyes were a heritage from his mother. White skin and name came to him from his father. More than that, Hall knew little, save that he did not like the man.

Wicks and Langsdorff were standing together, talking. Deboer was a few steps off to the side. As Hall came up, Wicks stared silently, no expression on his face.

Langsdorff ran his right hand over his great brown beard and, when Hall stopped before him, said noncommittantly, "Good morning, sir. You have come back?"

Hall nodded silently, and looked at their features.

Wicks' expression was blank. Deboer's bland. Landsdorff's hidden for the most part by his beard. Nothing on any face to create suspicion or incriminate. Wicks looked away after a moment, as though he was no longer interested.

Langsdorff asked slowly, "You have decided that a mistake was made last night? Or reconsidered your decision to sell?"

"No mistake was made!" Hall answered harshly.

Wicks' face reddened. He turned to Langsdorff. "My presence here won't do any good. I'll leave."

"Stay," Langsdorff ordered through his beard, and raised a hand in protest.

Wicks inclined his head and turned away again.

"Your business?" Langsdorff said briefly to Hall. "But I warn you, if you have anything to say about last night, it is useless. Wicks has explained everything satisfactorily. There has been nothing in his record to make me believe otherwise. If you wish to speak about my offer to buy your property, it is still open."

Out of the corner of his eye, Hall saw a hint of a smile on the plump, oily face of the Eurasian, Deboer. It whipped his feelings up again. So they had been waiting for him to show up at once and surrender?

"My partner was ambushed, shot down from the jungle and almost killed a couple of hours ago. I came to warn, not talk business! If another attempt is made, whether it succeeds or not, I will take my rifle and shoot the man responsible without questioning or warning."

Langsdorff's hand lay still for a moment on the front of his beard. He stared at Hall, and his mouth opened slightly.

"Your partner shot?" he exclaimed in what seemed an excellent simulation of surprise.

"Yes!. As you doubtless know."

"How could I know? Wicks and I have been inspecting the estate all morning."

"Yes?"

Red showed on that part of Langsdorff's cheeks that the beard did not cover.

"Yes!" he snapped. "Do you insinuate differently?"

"Wicks has been with you, too?"

"Do you think Wicks did it?"

Hall shrugged.

"Wicks left with me early," Langsdorff stated. "He has been with me all the morning. You talk like a lunatic! It was bad enough to accuse the poor fellow of cheating at cards. But when you add murder to it, it's time you were looked after."

Wicks spoke, his tanned face still blank.

"I can see how he feels, Mr. Langsdorff. As though I feel that last night should be wiped out in blood."

"He evidently does," Langsdorff agreed.

Wicks spread his hands.

"As a matter of fact I bear no ill will. I did at first, but on second thought I don't. I would do as Hall did if I thought I caught him cheating. He was the victim of an optical illusion—or rather I was. But I hold nothing against him or his partner. Macintosh must have an unknown enemy. Possibly some Malay of the district, whom he has offended. They have great pride, y'know. Almost anything will set them thinking their honor has been insulted, and the only way to wipe it out is killing."

There was sincerity in Wicks' voice. Hall felt himself wavering, until he remembered that Mac had seen the man cheating also. Wicks was standing there, lying with a straight face. Lying coolly, methodically, purposely. There must be purpose behind it. What?

Langsdorff, whether he knew it was a lie or not, chose to accept the explanation. Stroking his beard, he said approvingly, "Fine spirit, Wicks. Does you proud. You've hit on the explanation without a doubt."

Langsdorff turned to Hall and said, "This has been a miserable business. A misunderstanding all the way around. Wicks has convinced me that your estate should belong to this one. We have a great deal more land than you have, and it is all above the rapids and waterfalls in the river, so that we have a deuced awkward haul to get things to and from the boats. Besides having to run over some of your land. The properties should belong together. Matter of fact they would have, if you fellows hadn't been on the ground several years earlier.

"I have some money that needs investing, and can't think of any better way to put it out than buy your estate, and develop all the back part that you haven't been able to swing yet. That's all there is to it, as I suggested yesterday. The matter of the cards was a mistake. Couldn't have been anything else. Wicks has too good a record to stoop to anything like that. And as for the shooting, I can assure you that he has been in my sight since early morning. Four hours anyway. Your partner was shot two hours ago. That lets Wicks out. So you see, it is a mistake all the way around. Suppose we forgive and forget. No good in neighbors being on the outs, even if we can't come to business terms."

Langsdorff regarded Hall frankly, and stroked his beard as he waited for a reply.

Again Hall wavered. Here was Langsdorff, a man of great wealth and unblemished personal reputation, no matter what his business methods were. It was inconceivable that he would countenance a man who cheated at cards, if he was convinced of the man's guilt. He must be telling the truth there. But of the other, the estate? Some sixth sense ticked *"caution, caution,"* in the back of Hall's mind. Things were smoothing out too easily.

Langsdorff was looking at him expectantly. Wicks eagerly, in his eyes anyway, even if his face was fairly blank. Deboer, standing off to one side, was bland and uninterested. The Eurasian's right hand was hanging motionless by his right leg. The thumb and two forefingers were rubbing rapidly and nervously together. It was as though some inner current, bottled effectively behind that bland, oily mask of face, was leaking out there at the hand.

Hall noted that, and thought that it summarized the whole situation. Something underneath, bottled up. Perhaps, if he waited, it might show itself somewhere.

He shrugged.

"I guess you are right," he admitted. "A mistake seems to have been made all around. I'll forget about the matter of the cards. I might have been wrong. The light was poor. But I don't think we'll sell. Mac and I have put a lot in our estate. We'll hang on and reap our reward. Rubber will be up for the next few years, or so it looks. I don't think we'll go wrong that way."

Langsdorff nodded gravely, and on his face or in his tones when he spoke there was no evidence of disappointment. Rather he seemed to be relieved that things were on a friendly basis once more.

"The estate is of no great moment," he said. "All I ask is that if you and your partner do decide to sell, you will give me first option on it."

"We will do that."

"Good. And I am glad the other is settled. It grieves me that a guest in my house should feel that he has been treated dishonorably."

Langsdorff put out his hand. Hall took it. He couldn't very well do anything else.

"I'll have to go back to my partner," he told Langsdorff directly after.

Langsdorff nodded understandingly.

"Give him my wishes for a speedy recovery. If we can do anything, call on us."

Hall thanked him and left.

Anger had quieted. He was thoughtful as he walked back. Something was up. What? Mac had been shot down, in spite of everything that had been said.

Langsdorff seemed a mighty decent fellow. But there had been tension of some sort in the air. It was a thing to be sensed, rather than seen. Wicks had taken a funny attitude, too. It did not jibe with the man's character. He was one who bore ill will for the slightest thing. Tales were boldly told of his treatment of the native laborers. And there had been an assistant he had hounded off the estate because of a fancied grievance.

THE way home led past the Devonshire bungalow. Langsdorff's daughter was out in front, among some coconut palms that were planted there. With her was a small, brown-skinned Malay boy. She was looking up into the spreading branches atop a smooth palm trunk, and laughing heartily.

The boy was calling peevishly, "Hijau! Hijau!"

Hall knew what they were doing, even before he looked up and saw the small short-tailed monkey that was perched in the top of the palm. The boy had a *brok*, or coconut monkey, and he had sent the little beast up in the tree to pick a coconut for the boyish-haired daughter of Langsdorff.

The boy was ordering a green nut. The little brok was in no hurry to get it. A string ran from the animal's waist to the boy's hand. He jerked the string sharply as Hall stopped to watch.

The monkey made a face, ran a few steps to the nearest nut, and twisted it until the stem came loose and it fell to the ground with a heavy thud. The boy began to haul in on the line, and the young woman turned and saw Hall. She was not startled, and said, still smiling, "Did you find them?"

"Right where you said they were."

She nodded. "I thought you would."

Again Hall had the sensation that she was appraising him. He made a remark about the heat of the sun and went on, wondering if she knew what had happened the night before.

During the rest of the walk he thought about her several times. She was different, in her cool, possessed manner, from all other women he had met.

Mac was still weak when Hall got back. He raised his head anxiously and asked, "What happened?"

"Nothing violent. Lie back there and rest yourself."

Mac smiled weakly and relaxed again.

"How's the shoulder?"

"About the same. I'll be all right. Sing Foo fixed me some chicken broth. What happened?"

Hall told him.

Mac listened intently. "Wicks holds na ill will?" he asked at the last.

"Said so."

Mac shook his head.

" 'Tis not like the man. I would like it better had he threatened ye to your face. And Langsdorff? Did he act like he was hatching something?"

"I don't know," Hall had to confess. "He talked straight enough. But if he is telling the truth, Wicks couldn't have shot you. And if Wicks didn't, who did? And why? No one else had the slightest reason for doing it."

"None that I ken," Mac said thoughtfully. "Don't even see why Wicks would want to shoot me. I didn't mix with him last night."

Hall lit a cigaret and spun the match away.

"No matter what we see, someone did shoot. And deliberately, too. Once might be a mistake. Twice couldn't. You were right out in the open where all of your body could be seen."

"Yes," Mac admitted.

"I don't know what to think."

Mac smiled slightly.

"Keep cool, laddie. If there's more coming, it'll come. An' the cooler ye are, the better ye'll be able to meet it."

Hall drew deep on the cigaret and nodded thoughtfully.

"I think," he said suddenly, "I'll go out and see what there is to see at the spot the beggar shot from. Should have done that in the first place. Did it come from an angle, or straight ahead? Where were you standing?"

Mac described the spot.

"Path near there," he finished. "I don't think you'll find anything. He could hurry back up the hill and lose himself."

"I'll see," Hall said, and left again.

He found things pretty much as Mac said. Blood-stained weeds marked the spot where Mac had fallen. There was a little-used path near the spot where the shots had evidently come from. But in the earth of the path there were no marks. Nor nearby any shells from the rifle. Hall searched well, going back into the jungle and climbing the hill that arose rather steeply on the back of the estate.

A man could leave the faint path and lose himself at a hundred points. Hall finally gave it up and turned back.

THAT evening Mac's shoulder was feverish. Hall bathed it with a potash solution, and his face grew grave when he felt the hot skin about the wound. He urged a trip downriver.

Mac refused again.

In the morning the shoulder was worse.

Hall straightened up from an inspection of it and spoke to Mac bluntly.

"Down you go to the doctor! You haven't a thing to say about it this time. I'll tie you up like a sack of coconuts and take you myself if you won't go any other way."

"I'll na be a nut, or a sack of them," Mac decided. "The blasted thing kept me awake most of the night. It'll need the doctor after all, I guess. Do as ye see fit, laddie."

Hall did, as he would have anyway.

They had a fairly large launch. There was navigable water down to Kuala Pedang, the small town where the railroad crossed the river and the nearest doctor lived. Navigable water on down to the bustling seaport on the coast for that matter, but the attention of the doctor was all that Mac needed. Hall had the launch tank filled with petrol, and Sing Foo pack some food and clothes. Then, overriding Mac's protests that he could get up and walk, the cot was carried down to the launch—mattress, sheets, Mac and all.

Mac got out at the landing and cursed Hall weakly for being an overbearing young upstart. He could talk that way, being five years senior. And then when the cot was stowed snug under the launch awning, Mac crawled on it, glad to be flat again. Lost blood had taken everything out of him.

"Guess I do need the doctor, laddie," he muttered.

A few minutes later the Malay boat crew pushed off. The launch drifted a little, the motor spluttered into life, and the blunt prow began to cleave the muddy water of the river.

Hall stood on the small landing and watched the boat dwindle between the green walls of growth that came down to the very edge of the small river. And when it passed from sight around the first bend, he took a deep breath and walked slowly and thoughtfully up the bank. What next?

THE sound of a gun brought Hall up sharply a couple of hours later. He was near the rear of the estate, having a look around. The gun shot came from farther back, in the uncleared portion. Hall listened intently. The shot was not repeated.

He frowned. No mistake about the shot. Who could it be? The nearest kampong, or native village, was several miles downstream. The men never came up that far to hunt. No one had any business back there. It was the locality Mac had been ambushed from.

With a sudden tightening of his lips Hall started in that direction.

The estate had been cleared almost to the bottom of a line of good-sized hills. There, the orderly ranks of young rubber trees gave way to jungle that covered the hills and extended back for scores of miles.

The tremendous tropical rains had eroded the hillsides in spots, laying bare the rock strata that in other places was covered with many feet of rich vegetable mold. In the places so eroded, growth was confined to creepers that could find growth off to one side, and small stuff that would grow in the scanty patches of soil left in spots.

Hall followed the faint path up the hill a short distance, and then stopped abruptly as another shot sounded off at the left, and farther up the hill. It was the sharp crack of a modern rifle, not the bellow of an old trade gun such as most of the natives in that section carried. He left the path and pushed through the thick growth toward it.

A little later he heard sounds of movement, and shortly after that a subdued tune being whistled. It guided him directly to the bearer of the gun.

In spite of his best efforts he made noise, enough to betray him. Knowing that, he drew the pistol he had pocketed that morning and went ahead.

The whistling stopped suddenly. Hall knew that he was discovered. Unwilling to take a chance on being shot by possible mistake, he called out, "Watch your gun! This is a man!"

Then, pistol ready, he pushed through a tangle of creepers, stepped around the trunk of a towering, vine-embraced tree, and saw the bearer of the gun.

It was the boyish daughter of Langsdorff.

She was on the other side of a small rocky gully that had been eroded in the hill. Her white sport skirt had given way to khaki breeches, puttees, mannish shirt, and on her head was a *topee.* She had been sitting on a rock, and she remained there calmly, rifle across her lap, the muzzle pointing at him. Her finger was on the trigger, relaxed but ready.

Hall stopped and pocketed his pistol.

"Wanted to see who was shooting back here," he explained, feeling rather foolish.

She smiled slightly and took her finger off the rifle trigger.

"Is it against the rules to hunt back here?" she asked calmly.

"No," Hall answered, clambering down his rocky side of the gully, and up hers. "Not against the rules, but open to suspicion since my partner was shot yesterday. That is to say, unknown shooting. I had no idea it was you."

The smile left her face, and when he stood before her, she said, "Father told me about the shooting. I don't see how anyone could do a cowardly thing like that."

"Neither do I," Hall agreed grimly. "Makes my blood boil every time I think of it. Mac never harmed a soul in his life."

She nodded, and conveyed more understanding by it than another woman would have with many words. Hall wondered if her father had said anything to her about the scene the day before. He decided that Langsdorff had not.

"What were you shooting?" he asked.

She laughed, and reached around and lifted a small carcass from the ground. It was a deer, about as big as a cat, with tiny legs and miniature feet.

"I don't know what it is," she said. "I saw a movement and fired. When I found this, I felt badly. It seems too tiny to be true."

"You killed a mouse-deer," Hall said in amusement. "But don't hesitate to eat him because he is small. The flesh is fine."

"I'll try to bring myself to it."

She laid the tiny carcass down at her feet.

Hall noticed that the palms of her hands were black. He said jestingly, "You must have been grubbing around a lot."

"How is that?"

"Your hands show it."

She held her palms up and smiled slightly.

"They do, don't they? I sat down on a rock, farther up the gully. I was black. The color rubbed off."

Hall nodded, but tucked the fact away in his mind. He knew of no black rocks that would rub off.

They talked a few minutes more, and then she picked the dead mouse-deer up and got to her feet.

"Have to be going," she said coolly.

Hall looked at the small-bore rifle she carried and warned, "Don't go too far back. Perfectly possible to run into a tiger. We haven't been bothered with them lately, but there's no telling."

"I won't. I didn't intend to go this far. One step led to another. I wasn't afraid of getting lost because I could always cut down the hill and strike the cleared land."

"That's right. Still, this is far enough for a tiger."

"I'm going back now." She nodded and left him without further words.

Hall watched her jump lightly from rock to rock, push in among the vegetation, and disappear. His thoughts turned to the black rock. Funny about that. He decided to look himself.

Slowly he walked up the gully, keeping close watch on both sides. There was much rock, some in ledges that was weathering away, some broken off and the pieces tumbled about. Most of it was lightish in color. No black that he could see.

And then, some hundred yards up, he found the black. A seam, full ten feet wide, had been exposed by the forces that had eroded the gully. Some broken chunks were lying in the gully bed. Several were fairly flat on top, making good places to sit.

Hall reached down and wiped the palm of his hand against the nearest. It came away black. He looked about, found a chunk of regular rock, and threw it against the black.

Bits of the black splintered away under the impact. An examination of the fracture confirmed his suspicions. The black chunk was not rock. It was *coal!*

To make certain beyond doubt, Hall climbed the side of the gully and collected an armful of dead wood. This he brought back and started a fire. When it was burning well, he broke off more of the black chunk and put it on the fire.

An anxious wait. Then thick, oily smoke, and finally flame. Coal it was, that burned freely.

Hall's hand was shaking slightly as he lit a cigaret. Coal! A good big seam too. Several feet of thickness was exposed. There was undoubtedly more that had not been brought to light. A fortune there, if the vein worked out as well as it looked. All the time he and Mac had been sweating and pinching pennies, working up the rubber plantation, there had been great wealth in the ground that belonged to them.

It might have been there forever too, if it had not been for Langsdorff's daughter. No one ever went back there in the jungle. They had not intended clearing the hill for years, if ever. It was an act of Providence that sent the girl past that spot, and brought the sound of her shots to his ears.

Hall's thoughts suddenly took another turn. Did Providence send her there? She was Langsdorff's daughter. Langsdorff suddenly wanted to buy the estate for no apparent reason. Mac had been shot wantonly, murderously, for no visible reason. Langsdorff's daughter had gone straight to where the coal seam was. She had said nothing about the black rock until he noticed the palms of her hands. Now that his thoughts were working that way, she had even sat so that her palms were not visible. Surely she could not have gotten the black on her hands and gone away thinking that the black chunks were solid rock. If Langsdorff was playing a deep game, it looked as though she knew what he was trying to do. Perhaps knew who had shot Mac.

The questions came thick and fast. The cigaret burnt down. He tossed the end away and lit another.

What was the answer to this maze?

Ten minutes' thought got him nowhere. Langsdorff might not even dream that the seam was there. His daughter probably had done what she claimed, strayed that way hunting and dirtied her hand on what she thought was black rock.

One thing certain—here was wealth. Good coal, near water that would float it to the coast. Coal was needed everywhere. Over in the Dutch Indies also. As far as Hall knew, very little coal was taken out of the ground in the whole Peninsula. Some at Kuala Lumpur, where the Malayan Colleries had extensive interests, but the production was far short of the demand. Many places were forced to use wood.

Hall stamped out the fire and left the spot thoughtfully. As soon as Mac returned, they would find out how extensive the deposits were. One thing to feel good over. They owned the property outright, with no question about the title. The coal was theirs, and no need to worry about it. Nor money to develop it. That would be easy to get. If not from a white man, then a wealthy Chinese. There was Sam Kow Lee, down at Penang, who would back anything like this for a share of the profits. Not too big a share either. If Langsdorff had been trying to get the coal, he was out now for good. Hall decided to tell the man so at the first opportunity.

A CHANCE to do it that very evening, presented itself shortly after late tiffin. A Malay boy from the Devonshire estate located Hall in the chemical shack and presented a chit.

Hall opened it and read it curiously. It was an invitation to have late dinner and spend the evening at the other estate. The wording was brief. The chit was signed—*Marcia Langsdorff*.

Just such a note as she would send, Hall thought, as he scrawled, "*Many thanks. Glad to*," across the bottom, and gave it back to the grinning Malay. Brief, to the point, and thoughtful. She knew he was there alone, with the thought of his partner's misfortune, and she was trying to help out.

Later he told Sing Foo not to prepare dinner that night and to get his dinner clothes out of the moth balls and air them and press them.

He donned his dinner clothes with great care that evening. And stood in front of the small mirror and twisted and turned in the lamp light to see if they looked passable.

Sing Foo was helping him dress. That aged Celestial's wizened face crinkled into a grin of approval.

"Velly good," Sing Foo said approvingly. "Muchee nice."

"Everything in place?" Hall asked with an answering grin.

"Evlything light," Sing Foo stated, bobbing his head up and down.

"Fine. It's been seven months since Mac and I went to Singapore and I dressed up. Almost forgot how it feels."

The sun had set. Night had dropped with the suddenness that is peculiar in the tropics. Through the open window the insect chorus of the night droned.

Hall set out on the mile and a half walk to the Devonshire bungalow with only a small flashlight. At the last moment he had picked his revolver up and held it thoughtfully a moment. And then shrugged and put it back on the dresser top. It would be a nuisance. No need to bring it anyway. He left it behind.

He strode rapidly along, the beam of the flash outlining the small inequalities of the road. On each side the tall rubber trees stood like silent, meditating ghosts. Through their ranks the chorus of the night resounded. Insects buzzed and called, droning beetles blundered past, the frogs on the river bank boomed gutturally. Overhead a flying fox slid from one tree to another and landed with a ghostly swishing of branches. A little farther on some nightjars raced overhead, calling and answering.

Life of the night, unseen but present all around. Hall gave it not a thought. These sounds he was long used to, and thought of them as company if anything. What he and Mac had to fear came without sound, treacherously.

A golden moon showed mistily above the dark jungle on the other side of the river, like a peering eye. Hall thought of Marcia Langsdorff. Thought of her pleasantly, and with a distinct degree of anticipation.

Without warning there was a soft slither of steps on the earth behind him. His senses caught the sound, flashed it to his brain, and forced his muscles into instant action. He dodged.

Something missed his head and struck his right shoulder heavily. The whole arm was numbed. The torch dropped from his fingers and winked out before it hit the ground. Even as it dropped, he thought sickeningly that Marcia Langsdorff had lured him into a trap.

He reeled to one side and then lurched ahead at a run. No disgrace, that moment of flight. Anything to gain a bit of grace and regain the use of his arm. Murder was at his heels. He would live only by the grace of luck.

The feet pounded after. Gained too. The other was not handicapped by surprise and a numbed right side.

Hall swore at himself for leaving his gun behind. It would have evened things.

He risked a glance around. Saw a dark shadow right at his heels.

Another smash was due. To the head this time, without a doubt. The end!

Hall acted again without pause for thought. He stopped abruptly and dropped to hands and knees.

Legs crashed into him. A body sprawled heavily across him. Fell hard to the ground on the other side.

He had braced for the shock. In spite of the bad arm he kept his balance. And leaped to his feet while the other was still down.

No time now for scruples. The other was a dark blob of scrambling legs, arms, body. Hall kicked savagely. Felt his toe dig into soft flesh, and kicked again, ruthlessly.

The other went off balance. Grunted

with pain. Cried out softly at another blow. Tried to scramble up.

By that time Hall's eyes were getting used to the dark. He could make out a semblance of a human form, and located the head and torso.

Each time the other tried to get to his feet, Hall drove him off balance again with a kick.

His right arm was regaining some of its usefulness. He began to feel master of the situation.

Neither uttered a sound, save for sharp sucking of breath, and the grunts that were forced from the other. Suddenly he abandoned his attempts to get to his feet and flung both arms around Hall's leg. Clinging stubbornly, he began to draw himself up.

It was an unwise move. Hall saw the head come up level with his knees. Rise still higher. He brought his free knee up sharply. It struck the side of the jawbone. The other went limp without a sound, and slumped down.

A true knock-out. The fellow would be helpless for a few minutes.

Hall had matches. He fished them out, found that he could use his right hand a little, and lit a match. Casting back a few yards, he found the flashlight, and had light once more. He took it to the prostrate form and illumined the face.

It was Deboer, the oily Eurasian clerk on the Devonshire plantation.

HALL stared stupidly. He had been prepared to find Wicks. Even Langsdorff. But not Deboer. He had had no words with this man. Deboer had no reason to seek his life—unless he was working for another.

Langsdorff?

Deboer was in Langsdorff's pay. The dinner invitation had come from Langsdorff's daughter. It could not be anything but a trap, cleverly planned. Hall felt sickish at the thought. Marcia Langsdorff had not seemed that kind, no matter what her father was behind the big brown beard that hid most of his features.

Perhaps Deboer was acting for Wicks. Hall dismissed that thought after a moment. Deboer's kind would not murder for another unless there were big stakes. Wicks had no stakes to offer. Besides, as Hall knew Wicks, the man would get more pleasure out of doing the murder himself.

It could only be Langsdorff. He alone had the money to tempt Deboer into murder.

But why Langsdorff?

Why should the man want murder done?

Once again there was only one answer. The coal! No simple rubber plantation was worth murder. Langsdorff might want it as an investment for spare money, but never enough to risk the gallows. There were scores of other plantations he could buy for that purpose. But the coal was wealth. There was something to tempt a man, something to play big for. Even murder! It had been done for wealth. It would be done again.

But Marcia Langsdorff?

Again Hall had that sickish feeling. She must know, too. She had been where the coal was. She had sent him the chit. She was her father's daughter in truth.

Deboer still lay motionless.

Hall stripped the man's belt away and rolled him face down. He pulled the arms back, slipped the belt around them above the elbows, and drew it tight, without regard to strained muscles. The man was a snake, and would kill if he got the chance.

The belt put Deboer's arms out of the way. If he tried to run, his trousers would slip down and trip him. Hall searched him and found no weapons. He cast the light around and finally located the weapon the man had used. It was a short length of iron pipe. Hall picked it up, hefted it, and thought of what would have happened if Deboer had used a keen-bladed Malay kris. That would have sliced down through the shoulder and ended things, even if it missed the head.

Funny that Deboer had not used a kris or a pistol. Either would have been more certain. Probably caution. A shot at that time and in that place might be investigated. A kris would leave much blood.

For the first time it occurred to Hall that others might be lurking around. He darkened the light. Then, grasping the pipe firmly in his left hand, he sat down on top of Deboer and waited for the man to come to.

His shoulder pained sharply. It prodded his smoldering anger. Murder, for what they could make out of it. A bloodthirsty, grasping collection of swine. He located

Deboer's head; and timed the blow he would make if the Eurasian came to unnoticed and tried any sudden trickery.

It did not happen that way. Deboer came to, weakly, slowly. He stirred slightly.

Hall got up and turned the flashlight beam on the man.

Deboer regained full consciousness and made an effort to bring his arms around and sit up.

Hall watched silently while the other struggled to a sitting posture.

Deboer looked at the light, blinked, and then looked away, his face pasty with fear.

"Well!" Hall said coldly. "What about it?"

Deboer passed his tongue over his lips and remained silent.

"Well?"

The Eurasian's slanting eyes did not move from the ground.

Hall knew as certain as though he could see into the other fellow's head, that Deboer was thinking desperately of some way to get the upper hand. It was a savage business. Hall did not scruple.

"Talk, or I'll choke you lifeless!" he commanded harshly.

Deboer turned his head and looked into the light. His lower jaw moved slightly, and then set stubbornly. He looked away again.

Hall stepped behind him without saying more. He caught Deboer under the fleshy chin with his left wrist, and jerked up, digging his wrist bone into the wind pipe.

Deboer gagged. Strangled. Struggled vainly. Tried to shout. The words broke in his constricted throat and came out in a weak gurgle.

Hall pressed ruthlessly. Deboer grew weak.

Hall finally said icily, "Don't shout. You'll get worse." He released the man.

Deboer drank in air raspingly. His chin was wobbling.

"Now," Hall ordered. "Talk! Last chance. Why this attack?"

"I don't like you," Deboer said sullenly.

"You wanted to kill me for that?"

"I didn't intend to kill. Just knock you down."

The man was lying. No doubt about it. It showed on his face.

Hall tried a little bluffing.

"You're lying," he said casually. "Since you won't tell the truth, I think I'll do what you were going to do to me. Knock you in the head and dump you in the river. The crocs will do the rest. No one will ever know."

Deboer's face grew ashen.

"Don't!" he begged. "Let me go. I'll make you rich!"

"Ha!" said Hall.

"I know something," Deboer rushed on. "You will have more money than you can spend. Free me and I'll tell you."

"And have you run, or jump me again?"

"No! I swear."

"Won't do any good. If you are speaking about the coal on our estate, it's no go. I know all about that."

Deboer looked startled.

"You do?" he exclaimed before he thought.

That was the last thing Hall needed. His suspicions were verified. It was the coal! They had been trying to kill Mac and him, one or both, so they could get their dirty hands on the coal. Rather, so Langsdorff could get it. Hall had no doubt now that Langsdorff was behind everything. He had tried hard enough to buy the estate legitimately. Failing in that he had tried murder. No wonder Wicks had been whitewashed about the cards! That was a small thing, when murder was in the offing. Wicks was in it too, of course.

Hall saw red for a moment. He had a great desire to take hold of the throat of this oily Eurasian and choke and choke. And then take Langsdorff and Wicks in turn. All of them, who would shoot Mac and try to brain him for a pile of filthy pounds.

That passed.

Cold fury remained, and a desire to have the whole thing out at once. To let Langsdorff know that the cat was out—and to do the same thing to Marcia Langsdorff. He had been a fool there in truth.

"Come on!" Hall said through his teeth. "Walk ahead of me to Langsdorff!"

Deboer hesitated.

Hall dropped the pipe on the ground, shifted the flash to his right hand, and jerked Deboer up by one arm.

Hee recovered the bar and ordered, "March!"

There was that in his voice that sent the

Eurasian stumbling ahead into the darkness, his fingers groping at the rear of his trousers to keep them up.

THE moon had crept up a little higher. The light strained through the foliage of the rubber trees and outlined the way vaguely. Deboer plodded on silently. Hall strode just behind, wary, alert for a move to escape.

They were on the Devonshire estate. Presently the first of the estate buildings, the drying sheds, loomed darkly on the left.

Hall herded Deboer on, driven by the cold fury that had taken possession of him.

So intent was he on Deboer that he did not see the shadow that moved out from the dark blob of the first shed. His warning was a second torch that flashed out and played over them both. Startled, Hall turned his light there.

It was Wicks.

The man stared at them, his burly form motionless.

Deboer spoke first, hoarsely. "He knows everything. Stop him quick! We'll hang if Macintosh dies."

"You failed," Wicks muttered.

"We'll hang—" Deboer's voice broke in his throat.

Wicks hurled his torch at Hall and leaped silently.

Hall was on guard, but the hurtling light made him duck. Wicks reached him. Hall swung the rusty pipe with his left arm. Wicks got under most of the blow, caught him close, and squeezed.

Wicks was a bigger man, and much stronger when it came to that sort of thing. Hall's right shoulder was injured. It hurt badly when the bigger man mauled him and tried to bend him back.

They staggered a moment. Then Hall's knees were buckled in. He went down under Wicks, knowing that Deboer had slipped up behind and pushed the back of his legs.

Hall cried out, not expecting help, but hoping that some of the natives would hear and talk. After he disappeared, it might get out.

Wicks straddled him, ground his shoulders down in the earth, and stopped his cries with a rough palm.

"Unfasten me," Deboer husked.

"Wait!" Wicks hauled a handkerchief forth with his one free hand and jammed it into Hall's mouth violently. Then, holding it there, he ordered, "Come here. How are you tied?"

Hall's flashlight still burned on the ground, the beam pointing away from them. Deboer kicked it over so that it gave light to see by. Then he knelt in front of Wicks.

He was free in a few moments.

"Put that light out!" Wicks ordered, low.

Deboer obeyed.

"Help me in the shed with him before someone comes along!"

They carried Hall, despite his struggles, into the silent, black interior of the drying shed. Wicks kept a hand over the gag so it would not come out.

They dropped him roughly on the floor. Deboer held his legs. Wicks straddled his chest again.

Nothing was to be gained by futile struggling. Hall tried a moment and got nowhere. His shoulder felt laced with living fire. The bone seemed to be broken. After the one attempt to get free, he lay still.

Deboer snapped the light on again. Hall caught a glimpse of serried ranks of drying rubber sheets. Of Wicks bending over him, ruthless face twisted and drawn.

"Put that out!" Wicks snarled.

Deboer obeyed. Black darkness shrouded them again.

The struggle outside, and the effort of getting Hall in the drying shed, had left Wicks short of wind. He was breathing heavily. Outside, the noises of the night went on, quite as though nothing had happened.

Deboer spoke, almost in a gasp. "He's got to die! Now!"

"You fool! He was to die before!"

A little pause ensued.

Wicks muttered after a moment, "Can't brain him in here. It would leave blood. The men would see it in the morning."

"Choke him!"

"Shut up!" Wicks ordered. "Let me think. Put that light on him a moment."

Deboer reached around the other and turned the light on Hall's face.

Hall glared into the blinding beam and made another effort to throw them off. He succeeded in causing Deboer to lose his balance, but the fellow got back again and turned the light on him once more.

Wicks jammed the gag in deeper and shifted his position slightly.

At that moment steps sounded outside.

Deboer snapped the light off.

A shoe scraped on the doorsill. Langsdorff's voice asked: "What is going on in here?"

Here was the last of the vultures getting in at the death, Hall thought fleetingly.

Neither Wicks nor Deboer answered the question.

"I say," Langsdorff insisted, "speak up. What's the trouble?" As he spoke he switched on a second flashlight. Hall, and the men on top of him, became visible abruptly.

There was a second's pause. Then Deboer lighted his flash and directed it at the doorway.

Langsdorff stood there, holding the flash in his left hand, a pistol in his right, peering uncertainly. He made a motion to his beard with his right hand, and then remembered the pistol and held it out uncertainly.

Deboer stood up.

"See, Mr. Langsdorff," he said, and his voice was little more than a chatter, "see what we caught down the road?"

Langsdorff took a step forward and looked down at Hall.

"Why, that's Mr. Hall!" he uttered. "What is the meaning of this? He was to dine with us this evening."

"Quite so," Deboer said, slipping up to his side. "He was. Now—" Deboer snatched the pistol from Langsdorff's loose grasp and leaped back.

"Don't move!" he chattered. "Not a step. I'll shoot."

No need to warn. Langsdorff stood stock still, gazing in fascination at the little dark hole in the end of the pistol barrel. It wavered, as Deboer's hand shook.

"We're in it," the Eurasian whimpered. "Deeper all the time. Have to kill him too, Wicks. He's seen. He knows. He'll tell. He must die too!"

Deboer sidled around and got between Langsdorff and the door. He looked like a pulpy visitor from the evil regions as he stood there with the gun pointing at Langsdorff.

Wicks was plainly dazed. Things were moving fast for him. He looked at Langsdorff irresolutely.

"What is the matter?" Langsdorff asked, fumbling at his beard.

"The matter? Things have gone to hell!" Wicks said suddenly, and laughed harshly.

"What?"

Wicks gestured with his right hand.

"You should have stayed at the bungalow. Now we'll have to kill you too."

Hall listened with amazement. Langsdorff was an outsider after all. He had no hand in all this. That meant that Marcia Langsdorff was clean also. Hall was incongruously glad that he had been granted that knowledge before the end. It was something to take with him.

"Kill me?" Langsdorff could not comprehend. He looked at Wicks, and then craned his head around at Deboer.

Wicks nodded, and suddenly spoke freely, if thickly.

"I hate to do it, Mr. Langsdorff. I do. But we're in too deep now. We were playing for big money and lost. There is coal on the next estate. Deboer found it and told me. I tried to get you to buy it. Then we were going to put a plan up to you. Part interest in any mineral finds in this region. You to finance. You would have signed, I know. Then—this man refused to sell. That left us out cold. Poor men for the rest of our lives. Deboer reasoned that if one died, the other would have to sell, or be glad to. He tried to kill Macintosh, and failed. Hall was due over this evening. Deboer lay in wait for him, and failed again. Hall found out. We were finishing it off, and now you butt in. You'll have to go too. Deboer is right. It's you, or us. No other way."

Deboer jammed the gun in Langsdorff's back and commanded, "Lie down on your face!"

Langsdorff jumped and fumbled at his beard.

"Lie down!" Deboer said thickly, and poked with the end of the pistol again.

The Eurasian was in deathly fear of his neck, wavering on the point of panic.

The menace in his voice sent Langsdorff to his knees, and then full on his face. He spoke from that position, shakily.

"You can't get away. You'll hang for it."

"No," Deboer denied, licking his lips. "The crocs will take you both. There won't be a sign. We'll be clear."

Wicks nodded. Here was a way out.

"Yes," he said through dry lips. "That'll clear us all right."

"The crocodiles?" Langsdorff muttered, and shuddered as he lay there on the floor. "Let us go!" he burst out. "I'll say nothing. Hall won't either. Give up this mad plan. You will gain nothing!"

"Don't listen to him," Deboer urged Wicks, keeping the light playing on them. "Hurry up. We'll hang yet!"

"How about yourself?" Wicks snarled, looking around. "You're damned eager for me to kill. What are you going to do?"

Deboer did not answer at once.

"Getting a yellow streak?" Wicks sneered.

"No," Deboer denied huskily. "I'll—kill one. I don't like to choke, that's all. I'm afraid I'll feel it afterwards. Feel my fingers punching down in his throat."

"Rot! You fool. Use your belt."

"That's so. I—I never thought."

Wicks still knelt on Hall's shoulders. But Deboer was off the legs. Hall swallowed a dry lump in his throat. He could not think of dying there on the floor of the dark drying hut without more fight. Even though Deboer was certain to shoot him down before he got away.

He lay perfectly passive a brace of moments. Then brought his knees up violently. They struck Wicks in the back and toppled him over forward, cursing.

Ignoring the injured shoulder, Hall rolled with all his strength. Wicks went clear off. Hall scrambled on over and got to his knees.

Langsdorff moved too, as though to get up.

Deboer darted forward and swung the pistol down. The end of the barrel struck Hall's head, gashed the scalp deep, and knocked him into a daze.

"Lie still!" Deboer gasped to Langsdorff, and kicked him in the side.

Langsdorff lay still, obediently.

Wicks came up like a cat, and leaped on Hall again. There was nothing to it now. Hall went down in a limp heap on his face. His brain was working better each second, but his muscles still refused to respond.

"Hurry up!" Wicks ordered through his teeth. "Fix the other. We'll lose out yet." He whipped his belt off, looped it around Hall's throat and tightened it.

Hall felt the leather bite into his neck. Saw Deboer move toward Langsdorff. Tried to breathe and could not. It was the end.

THE light of Deboer's flash moved from them and centered on Langsdorff. Against that background Wicks' figure loomed darkly above him. He tried to struggle and could only move weakly. Wicks held him to the floor easily.

The end without doubt. He grew faint.

Langsdorff cried out, "Don't! Help! Help!"

Wicks rasped, "Stop him!"

Before he finished speaking there was the sharp burst of an exploding shell.

Through the interior of the drying shed a smothered cry rang.

It was followed by two thuds and a flashlight and pistol dropped on the floor. Then a body toppled over after it and the head struck heavily.

Wicks let go of the belt and sprang up abruptly, and plunged toward the rear of the shed, blundering into the racks of drying rubber sheets as he went.

Hall raised his arms weakly and pulled the belt from around his neck. He turned his head. On the floor near him the fallen flashlight still burned. A foot or so away a plump white hand lay in the light, and the fingers opened and closed spasmodically. Not so clear, beyond, was the slumped body of Deboer.

All that, Hall took in with one glance. Wicks reached the rear of the shed. There was a closed door there. It burst out as Wicks threw his weight against it. The man was gone, escaped.

For a second. Then another shot sounded at the rear of the drying shed. And another. After that the black night seemed to close down on everything. In the circle of light the soft, white fingers still moved, but slower.

Beyond, in the darkness, Langsdorff stirred.

Hall sat up, drinking in the cool night air in gulps.

"What—what happened?" Langsdorff stuttered, and sat up also.

Hall reached over, picked the light up, and cast the beam on Deboer. The man's eyes were closed. He breathed raspingly, and a slight froth of red flecked the corners of his mouth.

From the doorway Marcia Langsdorff's voice asked tensely, "Are you all right, father?"

Langsdorff got to his feet.

"I—I guess so," he answered haltingly. "What did you do, Marcia?"

Hall lighted the doorway. She was in it, wearing a dark wrap over a light dress, pale but possessed, a rifle in her hands.

"Are you both all right?" she asked anxiously.

"I am," her father said.

"I am, too," Hall got to his feet.

Langsdorff went to the door, and asked again, "What did you do, Marcia?"

She threw an arm about him, and pressed him tightly, and said unsteadily, "I slipped back to the house and got the Malay who is helping cook tonight. He took your rifle. I got mine, and we came back here. We watched through the door a little, not knowing what to do. When you cried out, he shot. Mr. Wicks ran to the back of the shed. The boy ran around that way. I heard two shots. He must have—have caught Wicks."

"Wicks deserved it, if the boy did get him," Hall commented.

Langsdorff spoke. "You were right about him, Hall. I—I am ashamed. I owe you an apology. But the man had been with me for years. I trusted him absolutely. He came from my home district in Devonshire." Langsdorff shook his head and fumbled at his beard.

"A pity," Hall agreed. "I misjudged too. I thought you were mixed up with him."

"We will forget it—and look to the future?" Langsdorff urged.

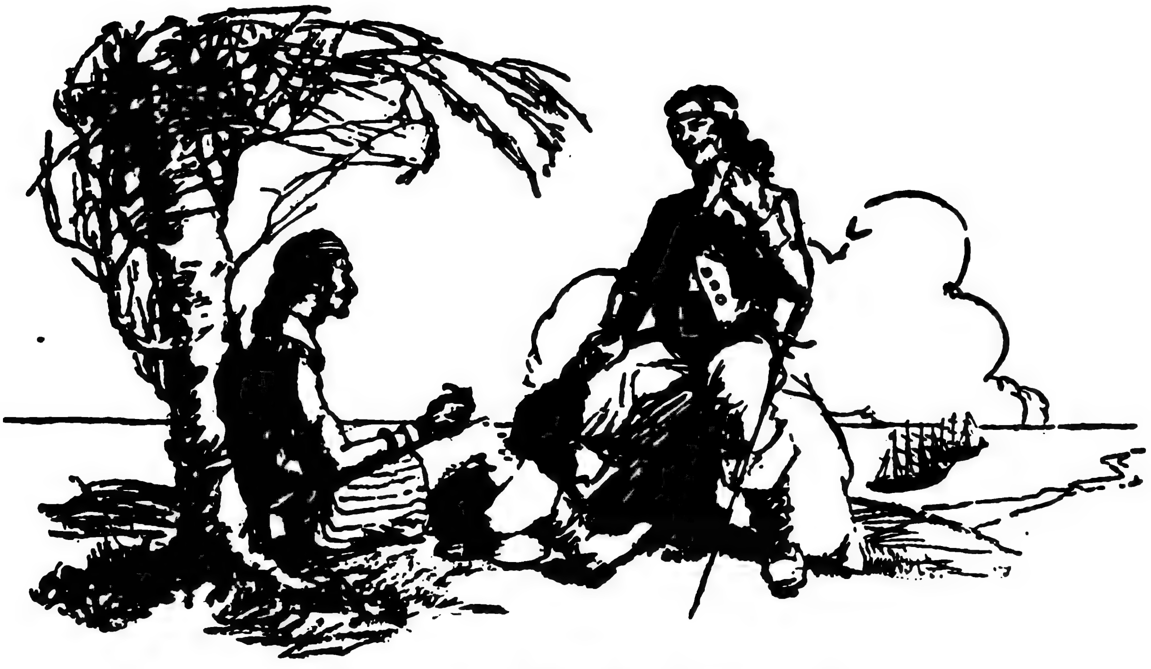
"Yes," agreed Hall. "The future. I'll look to that with all my heart."

The light beam pointed up to the roof and reflected light down over all of them. Hall looked at Marcia Langsdorff as he spoke. Her eyes met his. She colored slightly. And then a bit of a smile appeared on her face.

"I hope the future holds what you desire," she said.

"It will," Hall told her. "I'll—I'll make it."

Their eyes locked in understanding. She colored deeper. And then nodded.



Racy and Really Funny Is

What Causes That?

By ELWOOD F. PIERCE

WE BECOME well acquainted in jail at Springfield while we are doing our thirty days. This business of the map and hidden loot really starts there, although not exactly, and finally gives us plenty to think about.

Previously this Thad gent and I have been trailing around on freights and blinds for a couple of weeks when we meet up with the usual luck and a hick cop gives us the rush. So we go up before a judge on vag charges.

The judge is a barrel of vinegar cut out to be a Supreme Court Justice and is not able to appreciate that a couple of boes like Thad and me are too respectable to associate with anything so low in the social scale as actual work.

Thad, among other numerous things, has been a circus barker and knows the racket. It is while we are getting so well acquainted in the Springfield jail that he suggests we go to Hollywood when our month is up. Knowing the racket, he thinks Hollywood ought to be easy, and anyhow he wants to look the place over. So do I. As for Hollywood being easy, we find out about that later.

Thad says we'll go out there and get some soft money from the moving picture dumb-bells. There won't be any work attached to the process and that satisfies me. I'm absolutely, positively and emphatically opposed to work.

There is another stipulation that I make Thad, in the matter of self-protection. He has a story that knocks me into a fainting spell every time I hear him get it off. It has to do with a ship that wouldn't sail on Friday and as far as I can detect is without meaning.

So Thad, during those nice lazy days there in Springfield jail proposes Hollywood, and Hollywood it is. That's how we come to bump into Nice Boy and hook up with the adventure of the buried treasure.

We freight it out to the Coast and detrain at Fruitvale, and then do 'Frisco for a few days. On the first day Thad bums sixteen dollars on Market Street and I come through with twelve. Give me a nice sophisticated town like 'Frisco and I'll get the money, mostly by telling guys who have just had a good dinner at the St. Francis or Palace that I'm so hungry my ribs are showing.

After we collect, Thad and I ride in other people's cars to Los Angeles and finally drift to Hollywood to give Art a lift. Bob Lefty, who hit the road before entering a life that promises to enrich the films and give the public Bigger and Better pictures, shows us the ropes. It is Bob who introduces us to Nice Boy, who owns a high-powered car and has a knowledge of the world outside Hollywood that would make an infant weep.

Nice Boy is determined to become a great man in pictures, a famous actor applauded by the multitude, and is working as an extra until the day of stardom arrives. I think he is pathetic and feel like giving him a pat on the back and telling him to run home to mommer. But Thad, being progressive, sizes Nice Boy up as one who may be a help. I'll never forget Nice Boy.

Bob Lefty, who has a stand-in with the guys who give work to the actors, meaning the extras who run around and shake their fists in mob scenes, gets us started, and Thad and I begin our careers with a whoop. Soon it looks as if it won't be long before we are in the money and living in one of these here Hollywood bungalows holding gin parties and having the tourists point us out admiringly when we walk around the streets in our good-looking costumes.

This working in pictures is the thing I've been looking for, being almost as respectable as bumming. Us actors don't have much to do and never any thinking, which is jake with me.

In the meantime we get to know Nice Boy. His people have lived in Hollywood since ages before it ever was an orange grove and Los Angeles consisted of a dozen or so funny looking houses inhabited by two hundred and forty-one Mexicans and twelve hundred and six stray dogs. His great-grandpop or some such relation has come around the Horn with the print of a foot in the seat of his pants, an extra shirt and a disposition to trim the Spanish. Great-grandad has been a seafaring man working for something besides love of the open spaces. We decide that he must have been a pirate, but that is not until Nice Boy comes running to us with a map.

He finds the map in the garret of the family mansion while he looks through some old trunks for period costumes to use in the movies. It is a funny looking drawing, like the kind you find in an old-fashioned atlas, and is yellow and worn. Thad is excited and decides it is the real thing. It is a map of a coast line with islands out in the water where, I suppose, islands belong. One of the islands has some queer marks scrawled on it, one cross in particular, and some words written on the side, mighty blurred, but which Thad makes out as reading:

Buryd on J'ly sec'd at spot indikated by X one chest six paces north from where three trees grow tog'h'r by side of a rock and a 4th stands one and one qtr. rods away cont'ng much treas'r belong'g to Stickler for safe kpg.

Bob Lefty, all worked up like home brew, has an inspiration. "If that ain't Catalina, I'll eat my suspenders," says he. "Them's islands. This one well out is San Clemente and this'n with the cross is Catalina. That's the way them islands lay. This stretch of water here is San Pedro channel. There ain't no question about it, Catalina's the place."

His voice falls to a whisper. "Doggone it, boes, buried treasure! Gold, I'll bet; tons of it. Cold laying there in an old chest waiting for someone to dig it up. All we got to do is go to Catalina and be rich the rest of our lives."

"Say, Bob," Thad asks, "did you ever hear the story of the ship that wouldn't sail on Friday?"

"Excuse me while I go," I explode. "That's a good yarn, Bob, and maybe you'll like it. Only I've heard it sixty times myself."

Well, Bob and Thad don't talk about anything but the map. At first the treasure consists of one hundred thousand dollars. The next morning it has increased to five hundred thousand dollars and by night falls a few coppers short of a million. The morning after that I catch Bob and Thad spending the money, erecting mansions at Newport and Bermuda and buying race tracks at Tia Juana and Saratoga.

"Are you going to let Nice Boy in on

this?" I ask, and that opens a new line of thought. Thad and Bob argue and I find out that I am not to be consulted on the digging up of wealth.

I haven't expected them to be liberal, but I do think I ought to be counted in on anything that happens financially. Also Nice Boy is *out*. Later when he comes around inquiring for his map he is told that it is a fake and has been destroyed.

I feel like fighting for Nice Boy, but Thad and Bob, huskies, are two against one, and I decide that I had better permit selfish nature to take its course. Nice Boy is not satisfied, but he's game and says it does not matter.

Excitement over the map and treasure keeps up and Thad and Bob have a scheme. A moving picture company is going to Catalina on location to film "Days of 1812," taking seven hundred people and several ships to be used in battle pictures. The picture is to show how we fought for the freedom of the seas, or such like, and make dear old England like it. Bob says we'll visit Catalina, get the lay of the land and maybe dig up Nice Boy's chest of gold.

"We ought to have plenty of time to do that between battles," I suggest.

"We," says Bob Lefty, looking at me blankly.

"Yes, we," I answer boldly. "And any time you boes figure I'm not in on this for my full share you're dripping wet."

"Of course," admits Thad, "you'll help us. Likely we'll need you."

"I can always fight for my rights and don't you two false-face bandits forget it," I warn.

A WEEK later Thad and Bob and I are among the seven hundred journeying to Catalina in the interest of Art. We land at Avalon and trucks carry us to the isthmus where a camp has been built to serve as a base for battle and sudden death. There is a city made out of cardboard at the foot of the cliffs and indications are that all us guys will have a pleasant time, gold or no gold.

Someone yells, "Ah, there you are," and Thad grunts, "Good Lord, look!"

It is Nice Boy. He comes over to where we are giving a hand tent-pitching, saying, "I didn't know if you boys would be along or not." He has a gal with him and he introduces us. Miss Le Brew. Right away Bob gives her the name of Nice Girl, although I'm not so sure she is.

Nice Boy does not say anything about his old map and before the two leave I can yawn with my mouth shut. It looks like they are in love. Nice Girl has me guessing and I gather she is wiser than she pretends. She is like this: if you tell her she is the eighth wonder of the world she'll want to know what the other seven are. Nice and innocent, what?

"Did you ever hear the story of the ship that wouldn't sail on Friday?" Thad asks. She hasn't. Thad tells it manifoldly. At the end the girl looks at him inquiringly and asks, "What causes that?"

It always makes Thad sore when that story don't get over.

"My friend here," says Thad, trying to change the subject and pointing to me, "is on the way to riches. You wouldn't think to look at him that he's an inventor, would you? He's just invented a cake of flying soap for shower baths."

. "I'm sorry," pipes Nice Girl seriously, "but I'm afraid I can't buy any. We still use tubs."

Innocent? I don't think so. I am willing to bet that she is bob-hearted, interested in Nice Boy through selfish motives. Nice Girl queers his game with me. I don't care for boobs, although I may use them. If you get what I mean, I'm not strong for those who think the eternal triangle is something babies wear.

Nice Boy and Nice Girl are good friends and I suppose that some day a preacher with a book indulging in the matrimony pastime will put an end to their friendship. Nice Boy looks destined to develop into a married man who can put on his socks from either end. Most men are willing to pay more than enough for the privilege of being fooled.

"How did that pair get over here?" asks Thad impatiently. "We don't want Nice Boy hanging around, especially as we are going to use his map in digging treasure. I don't like that skirt either." As a very young man Thad was in China with the Marines and learned to use chop sticks. That probably is why he has a chop-sticky way of talking.

"We'll look after him," I say. "Don't you go to worrying about Nice Boy. He's harmless."

"We?" Thad chop-sticks, elevating his eyebrows.

"Yes, *we*," and I do a little chop-sticking myself. "If you think this treasure business ain't on a We basis, go trying some funny stuff. I've warned you, and I'm telling you again. Where's that map? I'll hold it for security."

II

THIS moving picture gang is an energetic one. There is a famous director telling the boys and girls what to do and what not to do, and an army of little directors saying "Yes" to the big director. I determine that I'll hit the grit again before I'll be any fool director's yesman.

The trouble is, as Thad and Bob and I soon find out, we are expected to work. This picture having to do with the war of 1812 is one of the biggest ever undertaken and is costing a lot of jack. Rules are strict with sentries posted to see that there are no shirkers, and plans are underway for sea battles.

We've come over to Catalina to hunt buried treasure, and here we are stacked up against a bunch of work. Thad and I are dressed as pirates, because pirates must have had something to do with this war 'way back in 1812, and Bob is made into a sailor with a beard and a mean look painted on his face.

Only there appears to be some question about the pirates. One or two mention the fact, asking how come pirates and why don't the people who get up the movie stories follow history. There is a bird that we call Mister Wise and he clears the atmosphere.

"If they want to put pirates in pictures they can do it, can't they? Pirates go over good, and if somebody thinks pirates would look well in a war, there's no reason for keeping them out, is there? And anyhow the public we serve don't know any different."

We hear there is going to be a protracted spell of fighting and that the pirates will get licked, some of them being thrown overboard where they are supposed to float around casually and wait for boats not in the picture to come pick them up.

Thad and I agree that if there is any throwing done we'll be on the pitching end. The ships are lying off shore, riding the waves lazily, without paying attention to those of us on shore who sooner or later will be smearing our moving picture gore over their decks.

Thad is having a good time and making a lot of acquaintances. He asks everyone he meets if they have heard the story of the ship that wouldn't sail on Friday. Three times Nice Girl is in the crowd listening to Thad's line. And three times she ruins it by asking him in her irritating voice, "What causes that?" I get pleasure out of Thad's discomfort, but I like the girl less and less.

A number of 1812 War scenes are taken ashore. June Harkness has the star part. I've seen June before. It is hot on the island but June is keeping cool in the same furs she used to keep warm in the winter before.

We have eight days of this, with Nice Boy hanging around us whenever he can. I begin to speculate on whether he suspects anything. Nice Boy wears a costume that I guess represents an American citizen of 1812—a citizen or a soldier, I don't know which. He comes over at night and stirs around, watching us. Mostly he brings Nice Girl and whenever anybody says anything she asks: "What causes that?"

"I'm in favor of a double dose of poison, applied twice," says Bob, who wants to get after the treasure. "It's a bet that guy's on to us, and if we're going to do any looking for that chest we got to get him out of the way."

The next day we break camp and go A. W. O. L. for our first look-see. It is a sparkling day and as Thad and Bob and I ascend the hill we can look away to Long Beach and the rest of the shore miles away. We confer before starting and determine in our minds the spot on the island that the cross on Nice Boy's map is intended to reveal.

"It's on top of that hill, or I miss my guess," says Bob, who once in a time of stress worked in a garage and knows the ways of those who go after treasure. We are on our way. Below us the War of 1812 is on in full blast. We forget gold chests while we watch. Seven ships are in full battle array, four of them in close combat before it is over, sides scraping, men running about, smoke from old-fashioned weapons rising, muffled yells reaching us.

"Except for my foresight," says Thad, "we'd be out there pirating, probably walking the plank and landing in the water. Or some brave warrior would be catching us by the pants, rear exposure, and tossing us overboard, playing like. I'm not strong on these costume wars, preferring khaki myself, with bouvets and mademoiselles and maybe you eat and maybe you don't. Let others fight the film battles, say I."

One of the ships drifts away and soon is afire. Clouds of smoke ascend, great tongues of fire leap up and the rigging falls all over the deck.

"It looks to me," sniffs Thad, "as if one merry little war is ended."

We move on. "Do you expect to find the trees spoken of on the map?" I ask.

"I can't see why not," Bob answers. "The lives of trees are not regulated like the lives of men and if they want to keep on growing they just naturally do. In California, where there's nothing but climate, a tree ought to live forever."

"Bob," asks Thad, "did you ever hear the story of the ship that——"

"Yes, and I don't want to hear it again," savagely. "We ain't up here in the heat to crack jokes."

"What causes that?" Thad chop-sticks.

"I hope," Bob responds, "that if Nice Boy and Nice Girl have any part in this war, reinforcements are held up so long they can't be saved."

"This ought to be about it," puffs Bob after we've walked to the end of the world. "Let me see that map again." He looks it over carefully. "Yep! There's the opening in the island coast marked here, and beyond is the rock marked here. That's plain, ain't it?" He reads: " '. . . six paces north from where three trees grow together by the side of a rock and a fourth stands one and one quarter rods away, containing much treasure . . .' "

"Only," interrupts Thad, "there ain't no three trees hereabouts, standing together."

"Don't be foolish," Bob chides, assuming the attitude of a garage proprietor presenting a bill, "storms may have blown them down."

"Maybe it's the wrong hill," I venture. "Someone may have moved the right hill over where the wrong one belongs."

"Never mind the wisecracks," Thad chop-sticks, inspecting the map. "I think Bob's right, despite his mental age. If we look close at the ground here we may find tree stumps."

We look. There are no stumps and I feel foolish hunting for them. "This is a pretty big hill to dig over, and the only way we'll get anywhere is to dig it up," I say. "Only what are we going to dig with?"

"Why didn't you think of a shovel?" Thad asks irritably. "You know well enough we depended on you for that little thing."

"First I heard of it," I reply nastily. "Looks as if I have to do the thinking for this outfit, as well as all the hard manual work."

We prowl around the top of the hill aimlessly, rather disappointed, for Thad and Bob have their money spent and the map no longer looks so good.

"Gosh," exclaims Thad, "this must be the rock. Let me look at what it says. Here it is, '. . . by the side of a rock and a fourth stands . . .' Well, the trees don't matter after all these years; all we need is this rock."

Bob grabs the map and reads the inscription again slowly. "Six paces," he repeats, "six paces north from where three trees grow together by the side of a rock." He is as excited as a hen whose brood of ducks have gone in for their first swim. "That ought to be easy—six paces north from this rock."

"All right," I say, "I suppose you know all about paces. Let's see how you go about it."

Thad goes. Bob goes. I trail on the sidelines. Bob halts and Thad halts and I come up where they stand with my hands in my pockets, trying to look skeptical. I'm not telling anyone, but I've done a little buying recently with my share of the money in the pirate's chest. Suppose, I say to myself, that map does mean something other than decoration and we are about to strike it rich!

"Now that we have the spot but no shovels, what shall we do?" I demand.

Thad gives me a sour look. "You're positively impossible. We can mark the place can't we, so we can find it?"

"And then we'll keep an eye on each other," sneezes Bob, who is hot and sweaty, also fretful. He looks at me with his nose turned up.

"If you are referring to me you can keep your breath," I flare. "If you have any idea I'm in the business of digging up your old treasure chest and lugging it off the island, your brains need retreading. It's me had better look sharp and watch you two bozos."

"Well, find something," Bob exclaims irritably. "We got to mark the place here so we won't have to go looking all over Catalina for it again."

"What do you want, a red flag, a pitchfork or a hot cross bun?" I ask.

"Don't be fussy," sneers Thad. "We can come back to this place without an interpreter."

But Bob won't have it that way. I am wearing a supposedly white shirt, and Bob suggests that we place it on the ground and put a stone on it as a guide.

"And in the meantine," I demand, "what am I going to do for a shirt?"

"My shirt's blue and Bob's shirt's brown, so that yours, being white, will be best," Thad says suavely. "We can see it in the dark. And anyhow it won't be for long; we'll slip back tonight when we connect with a shovel, if you can be coaxed into remembering that we really need one."

I take off my shirt with some ceremony and Thad weighs it down with a stone. No use arguing anymore. These men must be humored.

"That's fine," opines Bob. "This time next week we'll be rolling in jack. After we've divided up I'm taking a Pullman East."

We are too occupied to notice the approach of a young man and a girl. "Hello," calls Nice Boy brightly as he walks over to where we are standing. "What are you doing?"

"We came up to watch the battle," Thad explains quickly, "and it got tiresome. Then we thought we'd play a game called hide the shirt. Did you ever play hide the shirt?"

"I should say not," Nice Boy answers indignantly and I thought suspiciously. "That's a game no one ever heard of. Is it related to the ship that wouldn't sail on Friday?"

"The same general idea," Bob agrees, anxious to get his hooks in. "Only three can play it instead of two."

I reach down, put the stone aside, pick up my shirt and put it on. "You win the game, Thad," I say, thinking it best to keep up the travesty.

"What causes that?" asks Nice Girl.

III

EVERYBODY is tired after the War of 1812 and no one seems to know who has won, so I guess the end is a draw. Only I learn later that the war ain't over yet, for there is to be another sea battle, preparations for which will take another week or so. Tomorrow there will be some fight scenes taken aboard one of the boats, but mostly for the next few days work will center around plans for the next engagement, in which I suppose dear old England, as usual, gets the worst of it. Bob, who once read a history book, seems to think England is defeated in the end, although he is not sure. We don't argue the point for it doesn't matter.

And we don't go treasure hunting that night. Thad explains he is tired and certainly Bob is in no mood to flirt with a pick and shovel. Instead a gang of us piles into one of the movie outfit's busses and drives over to Avalon, which is a town on the island, with hotels and cottages and tents and mansions and hot dog stands and the smell of fish. Nice Boy is among those present.

Someone in the crowd intimates that it would be nice to have a drink. Nice Boy surprises me by hopping to it. He is first to mention a respectable bootlegger and his knowledge amazes me. After that there is considerable questioning, liquidly speaking, and Nice Boy knows it all. Shortly we enter a back room where there is plenty. I indulge in a snort or two of gin, but I dislike the stuff and don't drink much. It ain't so with Thad and Bob. Nice Boy supplies the cash and Thad and Bob the thirst. Nice Boy keeps saying, "Oh, don't be afraid; this is just a game, like hide the shirt; it'll do you good," and it ain't long before both are comfortably lit and not keeping it to themselves.

Avalon is a nice quiet place, very serene and outside the bootleg joint that we visit there isn't anything on Catalina wickeder than a dance pavilion. Up on a hill, chimes play "Avalon," and "Home, Sweet Home," for some reason or other, and "Mighty

Like a Rose." Lights dance on the water and in the evening people who in the afternoon have looked over the marine gardens in glass bottom boats board other craft and go out to see the flying fish.

When Thad and Bob walk up the main drag drunk that way one can make a book they won't get away with it. In the Summer Avalon has two boats a day; use these boats or you don't get off the island unless, of course, one happens to own a yacht or a speed boat.

Thad wants to sing. I remember later that Nice Boy suggests it. Thad has been dressed in this pirate rig for so long I guess he's beginning to think he is one. So he sings, "Sixteen men on a dead man's chest."

"Quit that noise, Thad," I warn. "Do you want to get us all into trouble?"

"If he wants to sing I guess he can sing," Bob chides, siding with Thad.

"That's right," insists Nice Boy and I want to twist his neck.

By this time we arrive at the principal street corner in the town. I can hear the band playing, the chimes having been put to bed for the night. Bob and Thad get worse, and when we reach this corner they ain't altogether responsible. Thad walks to the middle of the street, waves his arms and yells, "Anyone in this town wanna fight?" Bob joins him. "And if my pal can't lick 'em I can."

"Bravo!" Nice Boy applauds, dancing on the sidewalk.

A crowd gathers. The real fun starts when the town cop appears. The town cop is about as big as a bottle-fly in winter. But he has a club, and a gat in his belt, and enough authority to make the king of England jealous. His first gesture of authority comes when he biffs Thad over the head with said club. It is as perfect a bit of marksmanship as ever I've looked at. Bob's fist shoots out but don't reach the mark. The club does, however, and Bob joins Thad in a little mental arithmetic, wherein the lesson has to do with the counting of a heaven of stars. After that, while the crowd makes merry, the cop drags them off to the lockup. I find out later that the cop also is jailor and as such immediately searches the prisoners with the usual results.

I get an idea.

I'll go around to a store, buy a pick and shovel, and while Bob is in jail listening to Thad's story of the ship that wouldn't sail on Friday, I'll climb the hill and see what can be done about the interred cash.

My pick and shovel are merely toys, questionable instruments for treasure hunting. I have a long hike ahead and I don't think much of it. I walk through the town and up the mountain. Weary? Rather. I do a lot of thinking. I wonder about several things, Nice Boy and Miss Le Brew, and how much we can depend on finding a buried chest with money in it. I'll just dig around and if I find anything I'll play square with Thad and Bob, although they don't deserve it.

Mountain goats jump about and give me a scare. The toy pick and shovel worry me. I wish steadily that I hadn't come. I sit down for an hour and rest. Finally I arrive at the general vicinity of my objective and there run into a surprise—or better, a shock.

A short distance from me two figures stand. One is digging frantically, the other close by holding a lantern that casts a single ray of light. I creep closer, cautiously. Nice Boy is grunting, every once in a while standing straight to take the kinks out of his back, while Nice Girl is encouraging him with, "Go on and dig; hurry up."

"It's foolish," Nice Boy protests. "Absolutely foolish. There's no chest buried here and if there is there isn't any gold in it."

"Come on," Nice Girl commands, "that's a baby way of talking. You found the map in an old trunk, didn't you? And like a fool you gave it away, didn't you? And the men you gave it to think it's on the level, don't they. They came up here looking around, didn't they? We found them just as they'd located the spot, didn't we? Well, there's this about it; if we're going to beat them to it you've got to get over being a child and keep on digging."

Nice Boy attacks the dirt and groans.

"What are you growling about? Didn't I have to walk up the hill too? If you hadn't me to think for you what would you do? Who was it planned this bus trip to Avalon? Me. Who was it got those three gents in on it? Me. Who was it schemed the visit to the bootlegger? Why me, of course. If they are safe in jail waiting to be put on the boat in the morning and sent to the mainland, who's to thank for it? Nobody but me. And when you find the chest mentioned on the map half of what's in it belong to yours respectfully. The wonder to me is that you had sense enough to have a photograph of that map made before you handed it out to the general populace."

"I've told you and told you," this between grunts, "that only two of them's in jail. The other was too wise. He's the dangerous one."

"So much more reason why you should dig like you mean it. We've got to get rid of this third man, too."

After that Nice Boy digs and protests and protests and digs. Whenever he shows signs of wanting to quit Nice Girl blazes into him. I decide that if they really find anything in the form of a chest it will be time enough for me to mix a little in their affairs.

It is daylight when they quit and as yet the treasure has not been sighted. "I'm through," Nice Boy gasps, dropping the shovel, "and in about five minutes more I'll be dead."

"Is that a promise?" Nice Girl asks with a sneer.

I watch them disappear, confident that they'll be back later in the day. I have Nice Girl and Nice Boy figured out as a sly pair, dangerous, and inasmuch as Miss Le Brew has suggested that I be gotten rid of, extremely desperate.

Nice Boy has hidden his shovel and pick before leaving, and I throw away my toys and go in for some digging. Nice Boy, under the nagging influence of Nice Girl, has made more progress scattering dirt than I suspected. I dig and dig and the more I dig the madder I get. I am mad at Bob and Thad for having fallen into a trap, and I am sore at myself for having failed to keep them out of it. I dig on, but no chest. It is very exasperating and tiresome.

I hear a shout behind me and raise up to see Thad and Bob approaching, death and destruction in their faces.

"So," screams Bob, "this is what you do, eh? Have us put in jail, and then come up here so you can have the gold for yourself."

"And after we accept you as a friend and a pal," Thad growls, forgetting about Springfield. "We pick you out of the gutter and let you tag along with us because we feel sorry for you, and then this is the thanks we get."

"See here, you two," I blaze, "that's enough. *Me* get you put in jail? No! And as for trying to beat you to the gold, had it not been for me, someone else might have carried it off. You two were caught pretty and I haven't any sympathy to waste. The sooner we get this business of collecting ready cash over, divide the money and part company the better satisfied I'll be."

"What's eating you?" Thad wants to know, looking at me belligerently with his bloodshot eyes.

"You'll find out good and plenty."

"Oh, pipe down," Bob amplifies in his best garage voice.

I tell them all that had happened, revealing what I have seen of Nice Boy and Nice Girl, and Thad and Bob have to admit that Nice Boy was anxious to get them drunk.

"Who'd have thought that?" Thad chop-sticks. "The little fool! But if he dug this nice hole I give Nice Boy credit for considerable ambition. It's your fault," turning to me. "I wanted to throw him overboard but you wouldn't have it."

"How did you two hoboes get out of jail?" I ask, for it is time we got on a different subject.

"Walked out," Bob explains. "That jail wasn't made to hold anyone. I gave the wall a kick and made a hole in it big enough to crawl through. We suspected you'd be up here. And anyhow we heard that the justice of the peace and the town cop and the jailor are the same man, and we knew what that would mean. He'd fine us the amount of money he took off us in his rôle of jailor, and boot us off the island. That was an easy jail to get out of, wasn't it, Thad?"

"Easy enough, only you don't tell it right. I'm the guy who got us out. I put four sticks of dynamite under the place and blew it up."

"That's right," Bob agrees. "The explosion gave us our start and we went sailing out as if we'd been riding an airplane. It was a lovely trip."

"Which means," I say, "that it isn't any of my business how you broke jail. All right, if that's the way you feel about it."

IV

WE ARGUE and I suggest that for the time we give up treasure hunting. I'm beginning to lose faith. Bob and Thad I put down as a pair of would-be throw-him-downers, and any noise about a chest of gold now has an elusive sound. So I hide the pick and shovel where Nice Boy can't find them, and we toil back to the War of 1812, doing some high and fancy sleeping, while in the distance an important—or I suppose it is important—battle goes on. Apparently there isn't anything to the War of 1812 except battles.

Around noon Nice Boy comes in dressed up like the Vanderbilt poodle, in gold lace and epaulets. He struts like a peacock on Easter morning and rattles his sword like Nelson at Trafalgar. He is on the road to becoming an actual actor, he tells us, having been selected to play the part of an admiral—because of his shape, he explains. I look over said shape and it don't inspire me none. He is decorated in false whiskers and a big mustache and puts me in mind of an earthquake in Jerusalem. He struts some more and tells us what a fine fellow he is and how he is likely to become a star, his great talent having been recognized at last.

"I'll be busy all afternoon rehearsing," Nice Boy says, "because I've got a fat part. Tomorrow we have another battle."

Thad groans. "Don't they ever do anything around here but fight battles?" And then maliciously, "What causes that?"

Immediately Nice Boy remembers—or pretends to remember. "What happened to you fellows last night after the policeman took you away? I warned you that you'd better not drink too much."

Bob looks surprised. I catch the cue and stare at Nice Boy questioningly. Bob also is wise and asks: "Why, what happened last night?"

"Now don't you try to kid me," says Hollywood's finest with an airy wave of the hand.

"What are you driving at?" Thad inquires.

"You know! What happened after we left the bootleggers where you took me against my protests."

"If we did, you dreamed it," I explain irritably. "I've been walking the straight and narrow and haven't called on a bootlegger in more than two years. I don't use the stuff."

Nice Boy frowns and purses his lips looking us over individually and collectively.

"Nor me either," Thad drawls, spitting to get the taste out of his mouth. "Where did it all happen?"

"You know well enough where it happened—at Avalon."

"Were you at Avalon last night?" Bob queries.

"Yes, I was, and so were you. You and Thad were arrested."

"We were not!" Thad says, showing indications of anger. "That's a nice rep to give a guy. Are you trying to insult us? Why we didn't leave the isthmus. We played cards until ten o'clock, then hit the hay. Didn't we?"

"I know I did. There isn't anything wrong with you, is there?" I ask Nice Boy.

"As for me, I'll be asleep by seven tonight," Bob yawns. "I feel so lazy right now that I don't care how much longer this war lasts."

"You guys go to hell!" squeaks Nice Boy and he turns on his heels and clangs his sword out of our tent.

"Well, he's found out that we didn't go in search of the treasure," I say. "That's what he came snooping around for. Notice how surprised he was to see us back. He didn't calculate on you bustin' out of jail."

"It's too bad," laments Thad, "that a man who owns such a nice automobile has to turn out so bad. Human nature is always disappointing me."

After a while one of the eighteenth assistant yes-men comes into our tent and says loudly, "Wotta you guys think this is, a picnic? Snap intoot. We're paying you good money, ain't we? Well, come on; stir yourselves. This ain't no hotel for bums."

Thad gets sore, because a fly's been playing around his face and evading capture. He jumps up and things look bad for the eighteenth assistant yes-man who isn't nearly as tough as he talks. Thad has acquired a lot of mean tricks as a Marine in China where he learned to eat with chop sticks. I see what's about to happen, so I step in quick and am able to head off carnage. "We'll be on the job in three minutes; come on you fellows," I say.

"Not me," Thad rages, slapping at the fly, "and there are certain people I might mention who can go jump in the well-known Pacific."

"Then you'll have to get out," thumps the yes-man. "And get off the island damned quick."

"Don't mind my friend here," I put in. "He's sick and it's gone to his head. We'll be along in a jiffy."

"I'll be waiting and I won't wait long," the eighteenth assistant assures us none too pleasantly.

After he's gone I ask Thad and Bob how much money they have, and they tell me their cash was taken away from them at the jail. I want to know how they expect to get to the mainland, with my wealth consisting of one dollar and a few pennies. I opine that the craft leaving Catalina will be watched for two jailbreakers and inquire what chance they think they have of getting on a boat, because the moving picture people will not pay us until we return to Hollywood. They listen to reason.

"That chest of gold is what I'm interested in?" says Thad.

When I explain that we can't live long on a dollar and that we've got to stick to the movie outfit, Bob and Thad give in and we go out to join the yes-man person in our funny looking costumes. Thad is so mad that he looks like a pirate. We join the crowd.

"Did you see that?" I ask, pointing to two retreating figures. "There goes Nice Boy and Nice Girl."

I wonder what that means and decide that Nice Boy has put over a fast one on us. He has come around in that admiral costume that likely he borrowed to throw us off the track. He wants to make us believe he's acting when really he's up on the hill digging. He thinks we won't be particular about hurrying up there so long as he's busy in the picture.

That knocks us for a constellation of 1812 Wars.

"Let him go," I suggest. "The more he digs the better it will be for us. We'll sneak away after while, then go up and trail him. I've hid his pick and shovel anyway, and that'll throw him back. We'll watch, as I say, and if he uncovers the chest, we'll take it away from him. How does that sound for a scheme?"

"Rotten," says Bob.

But that's what we do. We play around with some 1812 War stuff for a while and when there's plenty of excitement and nobody's watching we beat it. We get rid of our carnival costumes and double time up the hill. We keep our distance when we get there and observe Nice Boy is busy. He has a shovel, all right, and I suspect that it is not the one I hid so carefully. There is another man with him, a big guy with shoulders like the side of a battleship. He's digging like he meant it and I wonder what Nice Boy has promised him. In a couple of more hours it will be dark. At the first sign of the chest we're to rush Nice Boy and his helper and take it away from them. It's all very simple. Thad is tough enough and desperate enough to take care of the bird with the battleship shoulders, Bob can hold his own with Nice Boy with both hands tied, and it is my part to talk chicken to Nice Girl, which may or may not be easy.

We have a long wait and it is about dusk when I hear a queer sound like a high pressure gurgle that comes from the diggers for treasure.

"What is it?" shouts Nice Girl, and she and Nice Boy rush to the side of the battleship gent. They stand on the edge of a hole looking down.

"I got something," cries battleship boy, like he was fishing and had a bite. Dirt flies fast. "It's a box."

I grab Thad to hold him back. "Wait a minute," I whisper. Bob's eyes pop and we all three are excited. It's a tense moment.

Nice Girl dances about and the battleship boy asks, "Shall we lift it out, or cover it over and wait until night."

"Not much we won't wait," Nice Girl asserts. "We're not taking any chances, with those three men knowing what they do and having a map. Lift it up here. I want to know what kind of gold it is, English or Spanish and possibly Wop."

Nice Boy and the battleship gent, who is a stranger to me, toss up some more dirt in a hurry, and then heave the chest. There it is exposed by the side of the hole, the most wonderful chest I ever looked at. Let me tell you it is a great sight and makes me weep for joy.

Bob and Thad breathe hard and I coax,

"Wait a minute; we got plenty of time."

Thad and Bob don't think so, apparently. I can't hold them back, so follow them over the crest of the hill and very quickly we are on the treasure finders.

Nice Girl screams and puts her hands to her face. Nice Boy looks dumbfounded and the battleship gent is ready for action. He pulls out a gat and it goes off with a bang that sounds like a new War of 1812. He looks down at the gun, scared to death. As for Nice Boy he hasn't sense enough to be frightened. The battleship gent's weapon explodes again and he throws it from him with a vivid gesture. I decide that a man may be a giant with dreadnaught shoulders and yet not be on friendly terms with guns.

Nice Girl wastes a lot of good breath yelling for help and I tell her to keep quiet. Nice Boy stares at us stupidly and his pardner looks as if he expects the world to end right there on top of the hill.

"So," growls Bob, "this is the kind of a game you're playing, is it? After all we've done for you. I blush for you, really."

"You go to the devil," Nice Girl says giving us a pleasantly nasty look.

"Now hike for it," Thad orders, pointing, "if you want to keep out of trouble. We ain't any of us in a mood to stand no fooling."

I am surprised to see Thad pull a gat of his own. Bob and I haven't any idea that he carries one. Later I learn that he's had it hid in his tent and is sorry he didn't have it along when the cop got gay in Avalon.

"This is a wicked little plaything," Thad goes on sternly when they don't make signs of moving. "And take it from me I know how to shoot."

Nice Boy and Nice Girl and the battleship gent curl up and just naturally die. There is despair in Nice Boy's face, Nice Girl looks as if conditions could not be worse and the battleship gent turns to Nice Boy and says, "How about my share?"

"It looks to me like you'd have to ask these gentlemen," replies Nice Boy with a nervous laugh. "They have the upper hand right now, but they're going to pay for this, and pay good."

"All right," Thad admits, "we'll pay when you are able to make us. You're just a snake in the grass, that's what you are, trying to do us like this."

Nice Boy speaks quietly. "You win. But inasmuch as this chest used to be in my family, I'd like a look at the valuables in it, if you don't mind."

Thad and Bob and I gaze at each other. "Why not let him see," says Bob, "that would be rubbing it in where the rubbing's good."

"Well, open it up," I order. "You three stand aside and watch. And don't make a move or Thad'll shoot. Won't you Thad?"

"I brought a hammer and a chisel along," Nice Boy says. "There they are lying there."

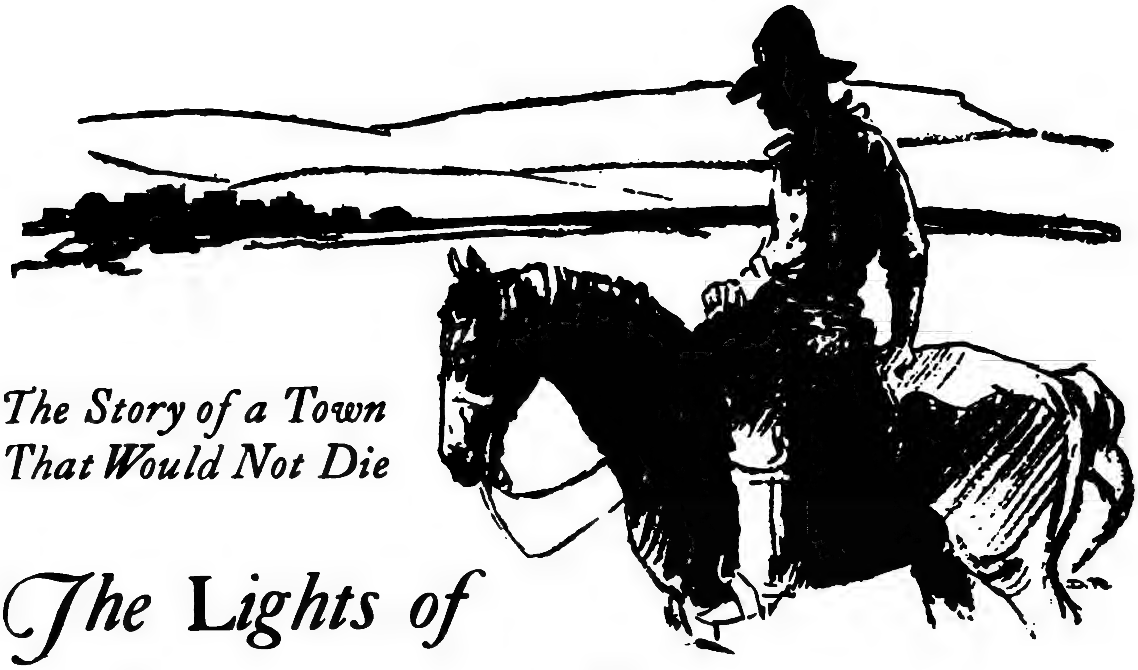
Bob gets busy with the chest, which is an old one all right enough, covered with iron bands and with a rusty lock. Bob hammers and hops and it isn't long before he has the lid ready to open.

"Be careful," I warn, "we don't want any of the gold to spill."

Bob's hands tremble. Thad walks around, staring at the chest and working his hands. Gold! Gold! Gold! My heart is thumping and in thirty seconds I've spent my share of the money. I've journeyed to Paris, visited Switzerland and sailed to Japan in my own yacht. Here at last we have a treasure hunt that turns out right.

The lid falls off and Bob stares into the chest. Thad falls on his knees and peers into it too. I get down and have an excited look. Bob groans and falls back. Thad grunts and suddenly crumples into an undignified position. I don't groan or grunt. I reach into the chest, pull out a bottle labeled "Scotch" and hold it up.

Nice Boy whistles. The battleship gent twists his face. Nice Girl giggles and asks, "What causes that?"



The Story of a Town
That Would Not Die

The Lights *of* LITTLE GRIZZLY

By R. E. HAMILTON

THE hotel of Slingshot McCallum, the halfway house at Little Grizzly, was quiet except for three sets of snores. Judge Heath was slumbering beside the stove. In the corner by the woodbox Tim Peters, the mayor, slept happily, his stockinged feet resting on a pine log. Friedl, the barber, crossed his legs upon the oilcloth table and relaxed audibly.

Slingshot himself, pipe in the corner of his mouth, was standing before the red hot stove, stirring a steaming mess in an iron kettle. He mumbled through his closed teeth fragmentary sentences to which no one listened or was required to listen.

Slingshot was the oldest of these four men. He was so old that his mouth had sunk, and his dominant chin pointed up toward his forelock of hair until his profile resembled the crescent moon. Hovering over this kettle and mumbling to himself, he was sufficiently like some male witch for an onlooker to expect his words to be:

> *"Double double, toil and trouble,*
> *Fire burn and cauldron bubble. . . ."*

He was so old that no one could remember how he had come by his title, and familiarity had made a given name out of it, as casual as John or Samuel. If pressed, he would offer some preposterous lie in explanation of it—with one shot from a sling he had killed four prairie chickens that sat in a row on a rail fence, knocking all their heads together. Or again, he had murdered the badman of Whitefish County by shooting a pebble into his ear at a distance of two hundred yards. The fact that no one had ever seen him with a sling detracted nothing from the telling.

Just now he was neither chanting a charm nor inventing a tale. He was voicing his nightly complaint to anyone in the room who might be awake, or failing that, to himself, his own best sympathizer.

“ and I ploughed through drifts and I ploughed through crust that like to sawed my leg in half. And when I lit Jack Prentiss's lamp, the wind through the broken pane of glass blowed it out. Had to rig up a shelter and light it again. Heinie Friedl, if you don't fix that pane of glass there's goin' to be a fire in this town that'll wipe away a entire block."

The telephone on the wall rang shrilly. It was a rural phone, of the type that must be wound up like a clock to summon a number. The handle now trembled slightly, as if in surprise, for calls at Slingshot McCallum's were rare indeed.

Heinie Friedl dropped his legs from the table and blinked. Tim Peters lifted his stockinged feet from the log, and placing them on the draughty floor, shivered. Judge Heath, moving abruptly, touched the hot stove and made a remark beneath his dignity.

"It's probably Wolf Creek callin'," said Slingshot.

"Answer and tell 'em to go to hell," said Tim Peters, the mayor.

It was a long time since the county seat had been taken from Little Grizzly and removed to Wolf Creek, but the wound to the pride of the Grizzlies was deep and painful still. Yearly and bitterly they petitioned to have the county line altered and their injured town included in the next county to the west, removed forever from this ungrateful neighborhood. Yearly it came to nothing, and only by shouts and insults could they preserve their aloofness.

"Sure, I'll tell them that," said Slingshot with enthusiasm. He had told them that often before, one reason why his telephone calls were scarce and brief. He moved toward the phone, unhooked it.

"Hello," he said viciously. "Hello, hello, hello. You got ears if not sense, ain't you? You poor—" His voice changed suddenly. "What you say, Joe? Oh my Gawd! . . . Yes, come right over, Joe. I—I'm sure sorry, Joe. Who done it? . . . No idea? I ain't got any either. Joe, you better come right over here."

The receiver fell from his limp hand. He hung it back mechanically and turned to the three pairs of apprehensive eyes.

"Joe is burnt out," he said.

Heinie Friedl uttered a wordless sound, more like a whine, of sympathy, and fat and sorrowful, leaned his head on his hands.

The judge swore tremendously, standing up like an irate soldier and hurling round after round of profanity at this act of fate.

Tim Peters, the mayor, almost as large as Heinie and with all the dignity of the judge, kicked back his chair and paced the floor. He said nothing, either profane or sympathetic, for some time. At last, "I thought there was nothing much more could happen to us," he said. "But it seems there is."

After that there was silence for two hours in the house of Slingshot McCallum.

"Shall I dish out the stew?" Slingshot asked once.

"Wait until Joe comes," said the judge. "He'll want some."

"The longer, the better," said Slingshot. "That's the secret of stew. So long as you ain't hungry, boys." He placed it at the back of the stove.

AT NINE o'clock the door opened without a preliminary knock, and there entered a short, middle-aged man with thin dark hair and a weather-beaten face. His manner was gentle. He brushed the snow from his legs and sat down by the fire without a word. A black curly dog, a water spaniel, followed him with drooping head and sank at his feet. It buried its nose in its paws but kept its eyes open, looking sorrowfully at the fire. Every now and then it whined.

"He didn't want to leave," said the man called Joe, indicating the dog. "He wanted me to stay right there where the house was, though there weren't nothing left but a circle of hot ashes."

"Good thing you wasn't a hot ash yourself," said Slingshot. "How come you wasn't at home?" He gave Joe some stew and laid a hand on his shoulder commiseratingly, then took it off and looked around, embarrassed. The men of Little Grizzly disguised their feelings.

"I was to Wolf Creek," said Joe. Like the dog, he was looking dully into the fire. "Mebbe it was a judgment on me for goin' near the damn town, but I was expectin' a load of freight. When I was drivin' back, behind the mules, I turned the elbow of Blanket Butte and I seen a glow in the sky. I licked the mules until the wagon rocked and lumps of snow flew up like cannon balls from under their feet. After we galloped through Sweet Grass Creek and passed out of the brush I could see it was my shack that was afire, all right."

"Ach, ach!" Friedl shook his head sadly. "They was nothin' to do, then. The roof had gone, and most of the walls. We drove up and looked at the fire: the dog, the mules and me. The dog, he whined continuous. We looked at it until there was nothin' left but hot ashes. Then we come away. I called you up from the empty schoolhouse—the phone ain't been disconnected yet—and here I am."

"Lose any money?" asked the judge.

Joe shook his head.

"Didn't lose much of value. The house and the old furniture, some letters that didn't amount to much, and a melodeon that wouldn't play very good. But it was all I had."

"The dirty scoundrels," swore the judge. "The Wolf Creek boys done it. I'll oil me a shotgun tomorrow."

"No," said Joe. "I wouldn't do that, Judge." He had a gentle voice, low like a pigeon's. "I don't think it was them."

"Why not?" demanded the judge. His thick gray hair stood up, rumpled on his head, like an angry comb. "Who was it, then?"

"I don't know, rightly," said Joe. "But someone had taken a knife and carved on the trees—you know how them cottonwoods surrounds my house, a grove of them? Someone had carved the numbers 1915. They carved it on three trees, so I wouldn't miss it. And on another tree they carved a picture or something that looked like a pair of wings. I don't rightly think Wolf Creek done that."

"1915?" said Tim Peters. "Why 1915? Who did you do dirt in 1915?"

"I never done no one dirt, that I recall," said Joe.

The men looked at one another, questioning.

"That was a big year for Little Grizzly," said Slingshot, half closing his eyes. "That was before they took the courthouse away. It was a rainy year, I recollect. The homesteaders had good crops—forty to the acre. We didn't like the homesteaders."

Four heads shook in unison.

"But they made the town boom. Think, fellers. What happened in 1915?"

"They built the dance hall," said Heinie Friedl.

"There was a gun fight behind the hotel," said Joe. "But it was settled."

"The railroad run through Wolf Creek," said Tim Peters.

"And I was shot," finished Judge Heath.

Four heads turned in his direction, startled.

"Kid Angel of the Guns," said Joe softly.

Comprehension dawned on the faces of the men. They nodded in unison.

"He's come back."

"He said he'd come," said Tim. "I'd clean forgot him, all these years. You'd think he'd of come back long ago, wouldn't you?"

"Went to Alaska, I heard," said Heinie Friedl. "Dot's a long ways."

"It wouldn't take him all this time; it ain't so far as that," said the mayor, speaking with authority. "Twelve years."

"What he done to Joe here, he aims to do to us," suggested Slingshot. "Joe was only one out of many. Kid Angel aims to burn up the town."

"He ain't goin' to," declared Tim flatly. Four heads nodded determinedly.

"We'll put a stop to that," said Heinie. "We'll lay for him. We t'ank you for the warning, Joe."

The judge looked into the door of the stove and stroked the unresponsive dog. The prairie wind shook the windows of the halfway house and stirred some loose snow on the window sill, beating it against the pane.

"There's justice in him feelin' as he does," said the judge at last. "It's human nature. You fellers would feel that way; so would I. He was done a lot of dirt to when he lived here in Little Grizzly. We thought we was in the right—but that's once when justice roped a cow for a steer."

"I wouldn't go burnin' up no houses," declared Slingshot, belligerently. "Not if I was done wrong to all my life. I ain't no Bolsheviker."

"I expect he'll be here right soon," said Tim, the mayor. "He's on his way. How come you beat him here, Joe?"

"I know why," said Joe. "He took the bottom road, see? Twelve years ago the short road over the bench wasn't broke. When he come tonight he didn't know there was anything but the old trail, over bottom land. It's two hours or so longer, that way."

"He was ridin'?" asked Heinie.

"They was horse's hoofmarks in the snow around my ranch," said Joe. "Only a few. Most had melted from the fire, or been blowed away."

"We watch for him," said Tim Peters

calmly. "There's a full moon, besides the regular lights of the town. We can locate him easy, when he comes. He'll expect to surprise us, but we'll surprise him first. You can oil your shotgun after all, Judge, while you're waitin', in case he should touch up any more houses."

The judge shook his head. "I'll watch with you, boys. But I ain't shootin' Kid Angel. After all, it was on my account that you——"

"Shut up," said Heinie Friedl. "We do it again, for you. Whether he was innocent or guilty, we do it again for Mr. Heath, the justice of the peace. Now come, I watch from an east window, upstairs. You, Judge, watch the west. Slingshot, watch from the kitchen; Tim from a front room on this floor. Joe, you stay by the fire and get warm; there's schnapps in the jug. Light lamps in all windows—maybe if it is very bright he will come here first to look in. I am sorry for this Kid Angel, but if he will burn up peoples' houses—we must do something."

To face the chill of the fireless east room he wound a gray blanket around his body, from his fat, collarless neck to his slippered feet. Then, lamp in hand, he padded up the stairs, the judge following.

Tim and Slingshot took up their stations below, and so at every corner of the halfway house one of the Grizzlies watched for the coming of Kid Angel of the Guns.

THE typical northern Montana night wore on, bright and silent and cold. The halfway house stood on a bench dominating the town, and the lights of Little Grizzly glistened below, a main street with a dozen lighted lamps, and on either side of this thoroughfare a row of houses. In every house was a light. The wind drifted and re-drifted the snow, packing it around one dwelling, unpacking it from another, and penerating the boards of McCallum's frame house until Heinie shivered, warming his hands over the lamp, and in the west room the judge swore with chattering teeth.

Each man, stationed at his window, held his eyes upon the town and the trail, but each man's memory was turning back twelve years, to the shame that had befallen Kid Angel of the Guns.

He had been only a kid, all right. They had never known him as anything else, for he had been born in that very town, and he had been in his first twenties when he got away. And though they had never given him much notice at first, he had grown up under the noses of all five of the men of Little Grizzly who were waiting for him now.

He had first seen daylight—and not much of it, at that—in a shack east of town. Even a small town like Little Grizzly had its questionable district. And though he was of American stock his mother had christened him Angelo because "it was such a pretty name."

So he had grown big and gone to school and suffered under the nickname of Angel, until several fights had turned the title into "Kid Angel" which was much more dignified, though it is hard to explain why. And in the town of Little Grizzly, at that time suffering under an epidemic of badmen, Kid Angel at the age of fifteen, appeared with two black guns—decrepit and minus holsters—stuck through his belt. Whether gotten up as badman or hero no one knew or cared, nor would have heeded him except that these guns were forever slipping out and falling to the ground, occasioning mirth. And since he was forever underfoot, the men in the streets would chuckle and say, "Look out for little Kid Angel with the guns."

Then his mother died, and Kid Angel went south, into the country of the Little Rockies, to work on the famous Picador Ranch, for he took to cattle like a rattler to the July sun. He mixed with all kinds of hombres, good and bad, young and not so young, and learned all the tricks that the Picador could teach him. In four years they made a first class buckaroo out of him and swore he did them proud. But when he returned to Little Grizzly he had two real guns, holsters and belt, and Winchester, and he looked too businesslike to be a comfortable sight around.

A few people, Judge Heath among them, declared that Kid Angel was still only a dressed up badman, but there were others who remembered his origin and believed that here was trouble in the brewing. The majority paid no attention to him at all, for Little Grizzly, newly turned from cattle to wheat, was booming; there had been three wet years and every homestead had been taken up from the railroad to the

Canada line. The streets were filled, night and day.

Kid Angel howdied with his boyhood buddies and licked one or two of them all over again, friend-like, to show he could. He spent a large chunk of his savings in riotous living. Then having stayed out his leave he packed his saddle roll, said goodby, and set out again down the long trail to the Picador. Some hours afterwards Tim Peters, not yet mayor but already a substantial citizen, missed a sorrel, two pintos and three black horses out of his own corral.

Word was sent north to the border and south to all the nearby railroad towns, and in two days Kid Angel was apprehended at Coal Coulée, on the way to the Picador, in the act of selling Peters' six broncs.

It was Judge Heath who found him. To the judge's time-honored job of justice of the peace had recently been added the new and dubious job of sheriff, and in company with Slingshot McCallum and one Jack Prentiss he was trailing the missing Kid Angel in fulfillment of his appointed duties.

The three reined in ahead of Kid Angel in a semicircle, cutting off the trail. The Kid sat stiff, staring back at them.

"Kid," said the judge, "how come you by Tim Peters' horses?"

"Which is his'n?"

"All except the bronc you're a-ridin' of. You know it, Kid."

"You're lyin'," said Kid Angel. "They was sold me yesterday by a old cowman from Canada."

"What kind of a lookin' man?"

"He wore a calfskin vest," said the Kid, as if reflecting. "He had only one leg and he had a impediment to his speech."

Prentiss and McCallum burst into guffaws.

"Wath it a lithp he had?" asked Prentiss. Slingshot, dismounting, began to limp about on one leg, pretending to be an old man from Canada with broncs to sell.

"Lyin' ain't no use to you, Kid," said the judge. "Get off your horse."

They were all four on the ground now. The Kid turned very red as they took away his nice shiny guns and unstrapped his Winchester.

"I arrest you," said Judge Heath, "in the name of——"

The Kid was coming out of his daze and thinking fast. Abruptly he regretted the relinquishment of the guns. He recalled the present mayor of Little Grizzly who came from Georgia and had extreme ideas. They were still lynching men for horse stealing in the back country.

". . . for being a dirty horse thief," finished the judge.

"Oh, I am?" said the Kid aloud. "Get back a gun," he whispered to himself. "You got a chance then." His muscles swelled.

Like an angry steer he plunged head on for the judge, rammed his head in Heath's stomach, caught the gun which fell promptly from the judge's horrified hand, and before the others could act, had pumped two bullets into the officer of the law. But his success ended here. McCallum and Prentiss, one on either side, caught and pinioned him fast.

They were indeed ready to lynch the Kid now, without preliminaries, when by a car, providentially passing, he was brought back to Little Grizzly. Judge Heath lay unconscious, apparently sinking fast. The populace rose in rage and in half an hour they had assembled, carried the Kid out of town to Sweet Grass Creek, had tested the rope and picked out the cottonwood. Then, thwarting their show, the doctor came galloping down the trail, an earnest, soft-hearted little man dressed in store clothes, arriving to spoil their fun. The judge had recovered consciousness, he said. No shots would be fatal and they'd all better come back to town and bring the prisoner.

The men beside the cottonwood tree had been keyed up for a demonstration. They felt cheated. Two-thirds of them were of a mind to hang the Kid, anyway. And then up spoke that present mayor of the town, who had lived near the prison camps of Macon, and was hot-headed in a crisis.

"We can whip him," he said.

In the West they hang a man, or shoot him. Whipping made these citizens uneasy. But this Kid Angel had cheated them of their shooting and their hanging, and they were not ready to go home. So they took someone's riata, and two of them held the Kid while two others whipped him.

The principal citizens of Little Grizzly were all there, Tim Peters, Friedl the barber, the saloonkeepers, the ranchers, Slingshot McCallum who ran the hotel, the fellow they called Joe who kept milch cattle. They watched the performance and at last they decided that it wasn't much of a show, so they said stop, and put Kid Angel's shirt back on him.

He looked worse than ever, then, for the white shirt became red and sticky. Kid Angel stood there, as silent as a ghost, glaring. A tiny trickle of blood from his shoulder ran down his sleeve onto his hand, and he looked at it as if it surprised him.

"You'll pay, Grizzlies," he said at last. "Every damned one of you, you'll pay for this. I can see you there," and he called out names, like a roll call, "Peters, Prentiss, Connelly, McCallum. And I ain't forgettin'. You'd better hang me now, while the hangin's good. I'd rather you'd hanged me before you done this; but since you didn't, you'd better hang me now, or else . . . I'll remember. Peters, Prentiss, Connelly, Friedl. . . ."

"Take him back to the jail, boys," the mayor interrupted. And they put Kid Angel on a horse and led it away.

That night there came a heavy frost. It was as if nature were making up to the Kid for what folks had done to him. It set in, and hard and stiff; and the wall of the new stucco jail of Little Grizzly, cemented with too much haste and optimism, cracked from side to side. An oak stool for a wedge did the rest; and although he was aching and weary from the beating, an hour's labor in the dead of night saw the Kid free. He made a complete escape this time and got clear of the country.

No one saw him again; there was no news. It was rumored that from Canada he had gone into Alaska and been swallowed up in that vast country.

EACH of the four Grizzlies, watching now from the window, remembered very clearly that unpleasant day under the cottonwood, and the boy with the bloodstained shirt and the empty holsters. They remembered him with more guilt and apprehension because of the sequel to the whipping. For, a week after the Canada prairie had closed behind Kid Angel, an old man, with one leg, an impediment in his speech and a calfskin vest, a man whom no one in Little Grizzly had ever seen before, was discovered in the act of removing horses from the halfway house corral. And not at all dismayed by being surprised, he blandly admitted to the taking of Tim Peters' six broncs, describing them accurately enough, and also to various other purloinings of stock not yet discovered. Investigation proved him to be in his dotage but harmless, and he was sent away.

The town talked about Kid Angel for a long time after that, and the true story being repeated in several newspapers, it was expected that he would eventually return and receive apologies. But when the incident dropped further into the past and Little Grizzly met new and trying times, he was neglected.

A traveling salesman, seeing his picture and hearing the yarn, once remarked that the town should make a saint out of him. That was what they did for people who suffered unjustly, and why not call him Saint Angel of the Guns? And so they did, jokingly for a while, then dropped the "Saint" for "Kid" and so forgot him.

"Poor young man," said kind-hearted Friedl, shivering over the oil lamp. "Such a night, he will freeze himself, and his horse too. I pity him. But he must not go around burning houses. That is not——"

The judge, across the hall, called suddenly, "Heinie, come here."

Obediently and trailing his robe, Friedl obeyed. Below their windows, over the drifted bottom trail that entered the town from the west, a rider came ploughing through the snow. He was muffled to the eyes.

"It's him," said Heinie. "Joe, Slingshot, Tim! The bottom trail. Look, he comes."

They gathered in the kitchen again, Slingshot still keeping watch by the window.

"We ain't got any plan," reminded Tim. "We will watch him until——"

"He lights a fire or enters a house," said Joe. "Then we'll act. But my guess is that first he'll come here, seein' all the lights. And then . . ."

"What then?"

"We'll hold him," said Joe quietly. "A little talkin' will help his case—a lot."

"Better get out our guns," said Tim. "If he comes to the door we will open it—and cover him—and talk."

They waited in silence. The judge relieved Slingshot at the window while the hotelkeeper put more coal on the fire and slid newspapers under the threshold to keep out the bitter draught. He left the room suddenly, and returned ostentatiously casual. When no one was looking he slid something over a nail behind the stove, a nail in a row where hung brooms and brushes, ladles and other miscellany.

The judge gave reports from time to time. "He's lookin' around but he ain't stoppin' nowheres. He's studyin' the town. The wind's knockin' him about like a piece of tumbleweed . . . That's a likely lookin' hoss he's ridin'. Cost more'n fifty dollars, or I'm a liar. He's stopped at Ike Connelly's and looked in the window. Sees Ike ain't at home. He's gone on."

Presently the judge announced, "He's traveled around behind the Silver Dollar Saloon. I can't see him no more, but he'll be here in a minute."

"You don't think he could surprise us?" asked Slingshot. "Get the drop on us?"

"How can he?" asked Tim. "He ain't got an idea in the world that we know he's around."

The judge left the window and took his gun, hesitated, and put it back. He sat down by the woodbox. "Any shootin', you boys'll have to attend to it," he said. "I had a kind of fondness for that Kid Angel, myself."

The other men took down their rifles, held them across their knees, and sat facing the kitchen door that led out into the snow.

The dog at Joe's feet began to growl.

"Get back to the window, somebody," said Joe, "and draw the shade. We don't want him lookin' in and seein' us this way."

The judge went to the window and pulled the shade down, then stood facing the outside door.

"Seemed like I heard a sound," said Slingshot.

"Footsteps in the snow," said Joe. "He'll be here in any minute now." The dog growled again.

"They wasn't in snow," said Slingshot. "Footsteps I heard wasn't in no snow."

"You're nervous," said Friedl, and laughed.

They still watched the kitchen door. The dog, however, raised his head and looked steadily in the opposite direction, behind the men.

"Drop 'em, boys," said a voice abruptly. "I got you covered, everyone. Drop 'em quick, and feel for the stars."

Joe, in his astonishment, ventured a look behind him before he obeyed, and a shot sang past his head. He, the last of all, dropped his gun and raised his arms.

"The front door," wept Slingshot in vexation. "Nobody's used that damned door in ten years. We'd all forgot it was a door. How he got it open without noise, I dunno."

"It was kind of difficult," admitted Kid Angel of the Guns. "But it was the door I was used to, when I lived in Little Grizzly."

HE STEPPED into the kitchen from the front room and studied the men.

"I see you was expectin' me—or someone. Was it Joe told you I was comin'? You been home lately, Joe?"

"I been where home was," acknowledged Joe. "I got your messages, on the trees."

Kid Angel nodded. "You got here quick. Have they put in a road over the bench, at last?"

"There's been one for eleven years," said Joe.

"I thought the bottom road felt kind of unused," mused the Kid. "Laid it to the drifts. Well, the town looks lively, all lighted up. I looked in at Ike Connelly's, but Ike wasn't to home."

"No?" said the judge politely. "Well, I did hear Ike had died."

Kid Angel looked at him sharply. "A stranger's bought the house? Well, maybe I won't burn that one."

"Burn?" said Friedl. "You wish to burn them all?"

"I'm thinkin' about it," replied the Kid. He sat down. "The house of every man that was there that day, under the cottonwood tree. Connelly, McCallum, Friedl," he began. "Peters, Prentiss . . ." He named them all, the roll call of the prominent citizens of the town.

"Ain't you kind of bold, talkin' it over beforehand?" asked Joe softly.

"After the place was burned, I'd kind of want it known who done it," said the Kid. "Otherwise there wouldn't be no point. I think burnin' is a good idea. It struck me sudden, a few days ago."

"I see," said the judge, rubbing his hair. "But if you go around tellin' about it, first, maybe someone'll stop you."

"I ain't tellin' no one else but you," said the Kid. "They's no other guests in the hotel. I been upstairs. And it's too late for anyone to be droppin' in here tonight."

"Yes," said Slingshot. "It's too late for that." He laughed.

The Kid frowned. "You're gettin' old, Slingshot McCallum. Old and childish. Yore chin's reachin' out to meet yore forehead. Stop that laughin', I don't like the sound."

"Did you ever think," asked Joe, "that maybe we five could hinder you from a-burnin' up the town?"

"There's ways to stop that," said the Kid. "I'm studyin' it over. Ways and ways."

"Sure," said Joe. "You have the drop on us. You could tie us and gag us while you done it, or maybe you could just shoot us now, outright."

"I ain't askin' you for your preferences," said the Kid. "Any more than you asked me mine in 1915, under the cottonwood tree. I ain't askin' for suggestions."

He said nothing for a few minutes. Finally, "Kick your guns into the middle of the room."

He searched the men then, gingerly, turning his back to no one, and at last tossed the guns into the other room, closing the door on them.

The five Grizzlies relaxed.

"You was a long time comin' back home," remarked Slingshot.

The Kid turned on him. "Yeah, I was a long time. I been so far away that I just heard as how the one-legged man confessed. News travels slow, up where I been."

"Alaska?" ventured the judge.

Kid Angel nodded.

"Make some money, eh?" Friedl asked.

"Yeah, I did," said the Kid carelessly. "A good slice more than there is in this town, I reckon."

"You think you'll get away, after this job?" asked the mayor.

"Tim Peters," said the Kid, playing with his guns, "I don't think; I know."

They looked at his hands, fascinated. He was still the faintly theatrical two-gun man, twirling his black pistols. Probably in his saddle a Winchester was strapped. The judge had a swift memory of Little Kid Angel with the guns, who wanted to be a hero.

McCallum had other thoughts.

"Kid Angel," he said, very humbly in his cracked voice. "Do you mind if I put on some coal, while we talk? Fire's goin' out."

The Kid nodded indifferent permission. Old Slingshot crossed the room and picked up the bucket. He lifted the stove lid and poured the coals into the fire, which promptly hissed and crackled back at him. Four or five lumps fell on the floor. He scooped them up with his hand, felt behind the stove as if for a broom—and then suddenly there was a sharp crack.

It was the sound as of stone hitting bone. The four Grizzlies stared. Old Slingshot McCallum had made a swift gesture with his hands, pulling one sharply back from the other. Kid Angel, still holding his guns, his mouth open in surprise, toppled slowly forward and fell, face to the floor. A lump of coal the size of a walnut rolled between the mayor's slippered feet.

"Hee-hee," cackled McCallum, dancing up and down. "Ain't practised that for many a year, but my aim is as good as ever. Hee-hee! Old and childish, am I, Kid Angel? Not too old yet, do you say so, fellers?"

They saw then that in his hand he held a small slingshot, like a schoolboy's.

THEY roped Kid Angel, hand and foot, took his guns away, and trussed him to a chair. There was a lump on his left temple that swelled rapidly, like a blue bubble.

"Like David done to Goliath," said the judge. "They's a lot of useful information in that old Bible."

"Slingshot," said Heinie, "why do you not tell us before about this accomplishment? I think they call you Slingshot for your shape, or something."

"Slingshot," said Heinie, "why do you and rubbed his chin. "Ain't I told you. Why, I've killed four prairie chickens with one shot. I killed . . ." He paused and coughed, embarrassed.

"Oh, all right. Hell, I'll tell you the truth." His voice came with an effort. "When I was a young squirt I was considered pretty good with the slingshot. But once when I was foolin' I killed a feller, same way that I knocked the Kid unconscious just now. It was an accident and everybody's forgot it long ago. But I never fooled with a slingshot much, not after that."

Friedl sighed and nodded sympathetically. "A pity! Ach, I knew a man once——"

"Look!" interrupted the mayor. "Look at the Kid. He's comin' to."

The Kid's eyelids fluttered. His face was very white and tired. They realized that he was not a kid any more, but a man in man's estate. Thirty-two or three they gave him credit for, reckoning up.

"You married, Kid?" asked the judge suddenly, for no reason at all.

"No," said the Kid drowsily, coming into consciousness. "No home, no woman." Then suddenly his eyes flew open. "What the hell is it to you? Who shot me? And what with?"

They explained.

"Sit quiet," said Joe. "You'll be better. Nobody's wantin' to hurt you any more, Kid, unless it's the dog. He knows you burned his house up. Hear him a-growlin'?"

The Kid glared and struggled.

"Good Lord," said the mayor. "He's sure the image of himself that day under the cottonwood."

"That's a unfortunate remark, Tim," said Joe. "Particularly as I was thinkin' how to pour some conversational oil into the Kid. Sort of tone down the memory of that, er, episode. Make him forget."

"Forget?" snarled the Kid. "Me? Humph."

"Kid," the judge broke in. "That was a bad day, twelve years ago, and there was bad blood a-boilin', but it cooled fast afterwards. As far as any trouble happened on my account, I'm sure sorry. I never held them two bullets again' you, Kid. As far as these men here," his eyes swept the room, "they'll acknowledge it was a mistake, what they done. Even Joe here, whose house you burnt. How about it, Grizzlies?"

"Me, I acknowledge it," said Heinie.

"Ring my name up," said Tim.

"Me," said Joe and Slingshot together.

The Kid said only, "Words is cheap."

"Not our words," said Tim angrily, and the Grizzlies spoke no more.

The little hours of the morning struck on an invisible clock in the next room—one, then two. "What are we waitin' for?" asked the Kid.

"Sunup," said Joe.

"When the town wakes," explained Slingshot, "we'll show it to you; and you to the town." He grinned. "The folks will be surprised."

Three o'clock struck. "They's a lot of coyotes yappin' tonight," said the Kid. "I never heard so many."

"They didn't uset to come so close to the town, when you was here," remarked Tim conversationally. "Coyotes is gettin' right bold. I even seen 'em skulkin' on Main Street, once in a while when it's real late, like this."

"Funny the dogs don't get 'em," said the Kid. "Must be a poor lot of mutts you got here."

"The dogs in town don't amount to much, it's a fact," said Slingshot. "They're mostly bones." He laughed again, with the peculiar laugh that irritated the Kid. "Funny we don't hear 'em barkin' right back at the coyotes."

"Scared," said the Kid contemptuously. "Cowards, like the rest of the town."

THE hours strode on. Four o'clock. Five. Slingshot tended the fire from time to time. The mayor and the judge started a dreary game of checkers. Heinie Friedl longed to go to sleep but felt the occasion did not warrant it. He scratched his collarless neck meditatively.

At half past six, Joe looked at the window. There was a pencil line of light bordering the drawn shade, and the cracks of the shade made pale, fantastic figures with the gray light shining through.

"It's morning, Slingshot," he said. "Put out the lamp."

They raised the shade. The sun was not out yet, but the coulées and benches were bathed in the cold light of morning. They unfastened the ropes around Kid Angel. "Look out the window," they invited him.

Suspiciously Kid Angel approached the casement. Below, the town of Little Grizzly was still illuminated. The street lamps flared bravely, fighting the dawn. Every house showed lighted windows, still. There was something ghostly and unnatural in all these lamps kept burning in the presence of day. It made the Kid remember stories of crimes or deaths that were discovered because the house lights had been left burning in the daytime.

"Don't you think it's funny Kid," said Joe, "that those people don't put their lights out?"

"W-why don't they?" asked the kid.

"Because there's no one at home," they said together, quietly.

"Kid Angel," said the judge, "you came here for revenge. But you got that long ago. They's no one left in town but Tim and Joe, Heinie, Slingshot and me. The town of Little Grizzly failed long ago, a year or so after you went away. If you repeat that roll call down on Main Street, there won't no one answer you but us five. You can have your revenge on us, but it'll be poor pickin's.

"We are the ones that had the most faith in the town, and we'll be the last to go. Some has died and the most has pulled out and gone away, but all has failed. We lived on anticipations. And in its biggest day, the town never reached a thousand population, even with padding the census, Kid."

"H-how did it fail," asked the Kid. "It was goin' good when I left."

"Dirt farmin', I reckon," said the judge sadly. "It was a mistake to take up homesteads in this stretch of country."

He swept his arm in a circle. "These sections north of Wolf Creek is bench land, high and rocky. The years it rains, all's well and the wheat grows fast. Then comes a time when they ain't a wet summer for seven years—or ten. You can't grow wheat then, but you can raise cattle. This was a cattleman's country, Kid Angel. It hadn't never ought to gone into wheat. It failed."

"Likewise," put in Tim, "we figgered on gettin' a spur from the railroad through Little Grizzly. But it never come."

"Wolf Creek got the county seat," Heinie added. "We went down fast after that."

"Wolf Creek!" cried the Kid angrily. "That lousy layout? We used to ride circles around 'em at fair time. We used to . . ." He stopped and bit his lip. "But you five still live here," he added. "How come?"

The Grizzlies studied their feet.

"Because we won't leave," said Joe. "It's our town, such as it is. It's still a halfway point between the railroad and Canada. Strangers come through; occasional they stop over. Slingshot puts 'em up, Heinie shaves 'em, the justice of the peace marries 'em or writes out their papers, and Tim—well, Tim makes speeches to 'em. Me, I still keep some milch cows and dogies. I do pretty well. But I'm lonesome, bein' the only cattleman here around. I reckon I'll move into the halfway house with these boys, seein' that now the shack ain't no more."

"Who—who lights up the town?" asked the Kid, a shade humbly.

"Slingshot does. Bein' a hotelkeeper, he don't like to see the place dark. The rest of us keeps the streets shoveled in winter and pulls a few weeds in summer. Scotch thistles and tumbleweed grows fast in a deserted town. Heinie, he makes repairs, but he finds it kind of hard to catch up on things, lately. We ain't so young as we was."

"You ain't very old," said the Kid, roughly. He turned his back on them and drew marks on the window pane with his finger.

"It's sure a shame that Wolf Creek got the county seat," he remarked again, irrelevantly.

"Ain't it?" said Heinie. "They t'ink we are all crazy, up here. They make a lot of fun about us."

"They do?" said the Kid. "I'll smash their—" he stopped.

Tactfully, they did not press him.

The sun rose, red and warm over the wavering yellow street lamps. The lights in the windows of the town could scarcely be seen.

"We used to think," said the judge, "that if a few men—maybe only one man with a little capital—would buy up cheap some of these deserted homesteads, run 'em together and drive some cattle back into the range again, he'd make good money. Then other cattlemen would see how easy it was, and the land would be took up again."

"That's what I been speechifyin' to all the strangers that comes through," said Tim, the mayor. "But they won't listen." He sighed.

"It had ought to be a pretty good cattleman, though," continued the judge, cleverly. He pretended that his thoughts were miles away from that room. "We wouldn't want any pikers. Kid, when you go away from here, if you run into any of them Picador boys, select some that's—oh, maybe a year or two older than you, and has had a little more experience. You might mention this country to them."

"Aw, they wasn't so wonderful, at the Picador," said Kid Angel quickly. "I know as much about cattle as them."

"That so? I always heard they was pretty good," said Joe, taking the judge's cue. "Well, you can't believe hearsay. Of course, they wouldn't be interested in the town like men that was raised here."

"A native son," suggested Heinie. "Native sons is rare. If we could find one of dem!"

"A man ought to have a feelin' for the place he was born in," said Slingshot, "even if it was only a jail."

Tim gave him a covert and dirty look for this remark, until, disconcerted, he rose and poked the stove. Presently he brought out some bacon and ground some coffee beans, the aroma of which filled the air like sweet music.

"Joe," said Slingshot, "if you'll go down and put out the town lights this time, I'll cook everyone some breakfast."

"I'll go with Joe and help him," said the judge, rising. He looked at the Kid.

"Well, Kid Angel, I suppose you'll be takin' your horse and ridin' away before Joe and me get back. Hope you won't try to burn the town, especially after all the repairs Heinie's made on it. Want to walk with us as far as the barn?"

"I reckon," said the Kid. But he did not rise.

"And don't forget to speak to some of those fellers from the Picador," said Joe.

"I'll think about it."

"Pick out a nice family kind of man," put in the judge. "One that wants a home and—that is, the town could use some new population."

"One example, that's all we need," said Joe. "Other cattlemen will come where one succeeds."

"Sure, that's right," said the Kid. "And if the town grew up it would take . . ."

". . . the county seat . . ." suggested Joe.

". . . away from Wolf Creek," finished the Kid.

"Sure," affirmed Joe and the judge.

They waited, but he did not rise. Instead he unstrapped his empty gun belt, rubbed his chafed wrists and looked with interest at the process of coffee making.

Joe and the judge went out into the snow. They did not look at one another, but once around the corner of the house, Joe suddenly smote the judge so hard on the back that the pipe flew out of his mouth and landed in a snowdrift a yard away.

"Shake!" said the judge. "He's goin' to stay."

Everybody's Meeting PLACE

Where writers, readers and the editor gather for informal discussion

FAR enough out of the paths of ordinary men so that their glamour never fades, the South Sea Islands have beckoned to Yankee rovers for three generations. It was almost a hundred years ago that whalers, three years out of Salem or Gloucester, first sailed home with tales of palm fringed atolls which rose from tropic seas, of a handsome, laughing brown people who made the stranger welcome and sang curious, soft voiced songs to entertain him, of a life which required no labor beyond the gathering of one's daily bread from the nearest tree. The seagoing Yankee was of a breed whose enterprise and industry have never been equaled, and though he did not cease his mighty labors, he paused long enough to consider for a moment the seductive vision of such a paradise come to earth. And his sons, and their sons after them, have cast many a wistful eye across the world to the languorous and mysterious Islands of the South.

The flags of several nations fly over the Islands, and the racial strains which have met there are many. But the legend that has grown around them is our heritage. The first man to write of them in the romantic tradition was an American, our own Herman Melville, who saw them from the decks of a whaler out of New Bedford.

A NOTE OF REALISM

TWO incidents of recent occurrence have sharpened the edge of *The Secret Lagoon* considerably for me. The first was the visit of a very new acquaintance, an artist, who is absorbed in placing in gorgeous color and line all the exotic beauty of the Orient, the South Seas and the far, windy oceans. As a boy he sailed with his father, who was master of a square-rigger in the Islands trade, and the sea was his school. Today he holds a chief officer's ticket on any ocean. And, man of action and artist both, he held me enthralled with his quiet voiced tales of mutiny and typhoon, of native uprising and piracy, of long days and weeks of glassy seas, and of white beaches beyond the coral reefs that lay on the rims of the horizon. He removed the veils of distance from the Islands, and only made them the more glamorous and colorful.

The second incident was the arrival of the *Melbourne Herald*, sent me by V. Moore of Murrumbeena, Victoria, Australia. On the front page appeared the following account of a present day tragedy in the Solomons.

Sydney—A graphic account of the massacre at Sinarango, in the Solomons, is contained in a letter received in Sydney, from Miss Joan Deck, of th

South Seas Evangelical Mission at Malaita. The letter says the murdered men were warned of their fate. Miss Deck says that on the day before the massacre the launch on which she was a passenger called at Uru, where Commissioner Bell and Cadet Lillies, the first two to have been massacred, were collecting taxes. While there Mr. Bell's clerk, Marcus John, "a very clever boy," told one of the launch crew that the Sinarango bushmen were planning to kill the two white men. On the following day Mr. Bell went down to Sinarango and started collecting rifles and taxes at the court house.

"Mr. E. Bell, we gather from the natives," says the letter, "sat on the veranda with Lillies. Three police boys were stationed outside, and Marcus sat at his typewriter, also on the veranda. The rest of the police were inside the court house, which was a weak thing of leaf, almost falling down.

"The bushmen had come down as an organized party, two hundred of them. We were told that they had knives hidden inside their calicoes, with a string attached to them so that they could be pulled out quickly. They gave in their rifles and a few paid their taxes. Then one man put down three shillings instead of five.

"Mr. Bell spoke sharply to him, whereupon he took hold of the barrel of a rifle and hit Bell a terrible blow across the top of his head, killing him instantly. Immediately all the others joined in. Lillies was mortally wounded at first, and ran into the house. In the mêlée the police outside were killed. The bushmen then rushed for the house, broke through the door, and so crowded inside that there was no room for the police to use their rifles. These were torn from them, and they were cut to pieces with knives and axes.

"Lillies was killed and with him all the police —about sixteen—save two, and five of the boat's crew, who were badly wounded. They escaped, ran down the beach and were picked up by the boat of the recruiting schooner.

"The boat's crew of the schooner was not able to get near the court house until 3 P. M., and by that time the bushmen had departed. They had taken all the rice, blankets, rifles, ammunition, all the tax money, and all the Government records. The place was bare. All had gone, and drums were sounding in all directions up in the mountains."

WHEN DOCTORS DISAGREE

THE best I can do is referee the affair when a reader takes exception to some esoteric bit of nature lore such as the following, which appeared not long ago in *The Siamese Cat* by REGINALD CAMPBELL. Mr. Perry's criticism seems valid; and so, I should say is Campbell's reply.

Perhaps Reginald Campbell knows what's what in general but he missed fire on the snake sitting on eggs. See page 613, Vol. 6, Encyclopedia Britannica, as authority. Every country youngster would get a great laugh out of that. I did myself; the story fell flat when I read that. The cat hair sounds fishy but the country youngsters and folks like me can't call Mr. Campbell for that; but snakes, all of them lay their eggs on the ground in an exposed place and leave the sun to hatch them. They do go back to the young and raise Ned if anything tries to molest their young. Please ask the gentleman to look up cobras before he has another Chink to kill one so neatly.

S. M. Perry,
Seattle, Oregon.

This letter was forwarded to Mr. Campbell and was answered as follows:

Of course I am aware that snakes do not sit and hatch out eggs, but that the sun does it. Actually, the snake in *The Siamese Cat* story was a hamadryad, or king cobra, which is quite different from a cobra. A cobra never gets to more than seven feet long, while a hamadryad goes up to fifteen. The natural history books say up to twelve feet, but I myself shot one once as long as thirteen feet six.

The trouble is that a lot of readers have certain book knowledge, while I have experience. I lived in the North Siam jungles for close on five years, and I know for a fact that hamadryads attack, should one go near their nests. Moreover, they keep their nests in all sorts of queer places in the jungle, and in places where one would imagine the eggs would never get any sun at all. A coolie of mine once was walking alone down a little jungle stream in very thick forest in the middle of the rains, where there was no open space or room for sunlight anywhere. He was suddenly attacked by a hamadryad, and only saved himself by jumping onto the branch of a tree (hence the idea for my story). He fell off a few seconds later, and sprained his ankle, and I treated him for it. He then explained that the snake must have had eggs hidden in the grass, and he had unwittingly gone near them.

Campbell.

OF THE GALLANT COMPANY

BELATED, indeed, but perhaps the more interesting for our acquaintance with several of the writer's stories, is this account of an adventurous career. HENRY LACOSSITT has another yarn of the Mediterranean in the present issue. We can take a not inconsiderable pride in the fact that EVERYBODY'S published his first story some months ago.

I was born in Shreveport, Louisiana, 26 years ago. At the age of three my father died and my mother took me to Hannibal, Missouri, where I grew up. I went through the University of Missouri, and there I finally received the degree of Bachelor of Journalism. Then I began my career, as editors insist upon calling it.

I've worked on several newspapers and done about everything but sweep out and set type.

I was a police reporter in Cleveland; a copy desk man and reporter on two newspapers in Kansas City; a telegraph desk man and sports writer in St. Louis; and I've been a newsboy, mail clerk, and the editor of a little newspaper. I might say here that, between jobs and a return to school for postgraduate work, I found time to bum my way across the continent, pausing for a while to punch cattle and pitch hay in Wyoming.

I became ambitious once and went into politics, publicity, and civic advertising. I edited a magazine for the city of St. Louis, and for a year lived the life of a bloated politician; but, unfortunately, the administration changed hands and I crawled out from under the wreck before it crushed me.

I've tramped through Cuba and ridden horseback through Haiti, flown by airplane through a tropical hurricane over Haiti and come within an inch of cracking up in the jungle; driven by automobile through Santo Domingo; loafed about Porto Rico and the Virgin Islands; played the piano for tips and drinks in the waterfront dives of booming Curaçao; gone broke on the coast of Venezuela and worked west through Colombia to Panama to be held as a vagrant and to be written about in the newspapers as a public character.

I've knocked about Southern Spain and Morocco and Algeria; explored the slums of Alexandria and Cairo and the tombs of the pharaohs and their queens; ridden burros and camels across the Lybian Desert; traveled with Arabs by automobile and in third class coaches in northern Arabia, Palestine, and Syria; made a wild dash through the interior of Syria by automobile, through the Druse war zone from Damascus to Aleppo, and from Aleppo to Alexandretta; been attacked by Syrian bandits, shot at and escaped; been robbed by renegade Syrian soldiers.

I've followed the tobacco and cotton trade in the Mediterranean; visited obscure islands in the Ægean, and I've been held, along with the ship I was on, on the charge of attempting to smuggle tobacco into Spain. The charge, I might add, was ridiculous, but terribly serious.

Now I'm living in New York, and, with the exception of a trip now and then to New Orleans or some place in the States, have stayed put. There's more, but I'll elaborate in the stories.

Henry LaCossitt.

OUT OF THE WEST

WERE he not so modest, Ared White might spin a yarn on the pages of the *Meeting Place* which would surely rival in sheer thrill and interest any piece of fiction he has done. Since his first appearance in the magazine he has sent us tales of the Great War. The Western story in this issue came as quite an innovation, and I asked him how it was he knew so well the remote country he describes. His reply was in the form of a number of anecdotes of the bad-lands which suggested an impressive wealth of experience.

Ared White gathered the material which went into *Buzzards* years ago, when he rode with a posse that pursued an outlaw band across the desert. A sandstorm destroyed the trail, scattered the posse, and caused the death of a couple of members of the party. The terrible ordeal some of the survivors went through was an experience few men ever have had the opportunity to observe at first hand.

In the next issue, Ared White travels farther westward; as far as the Philippine Islands, in fact, where he tells a story of mutiny and regeneration in a negro cavalry regiment during the Moro uprising. This, too, is a tale drawn from his varied career. It has a genuine punch. Keep it in mind.

A WORD FROM ANOTHER WANDERER

MANY of you doubtless have read the stories of R. E. Hamilton in various magazines. I was delighted to secure *The Lights of Little Grizzly* for this issue. It is an unusual yarn, and one I am certain you will enjoy. In response to my invitation, Hamilton speaks for himself in introduction:

I was born in Boston, but did not remain long, either in that historic city, or, as I look back, anywhere else. My education was prolonged through schools and colleges of New Hampshire, Massachusetts, New York State, Montana, California, and even included a course in Chinese in the Orient. My first outbreak into print was a pathetic poem entitled *The Dying Fern,* written about the age of sixteen for a boarding school publication, and exciting raucous comment among my classmates.

My stories have been laid chiefly in the West. For ten years I lived in various points in Montana, just below the Canadian border, in that section whose hot afternoons aroused comment from Walt Whitman and whose winter nights at fifty below are locally supposed to make icicles on the rafters of hell.

I may occasionally be located in New York City. I am also partial to San Francisco. At one time I was to be found in South China, but having crossed the path of an irritable native army which resulted in many bullet holes in our launch and one in me, I have since retired to more peaceful climes. A map of my complicated wanderings would win the approval of the railway ticket offices and excite curiosity among the police.

Such is the lot of an obscure and absent-minded author with a restless foot. However, one great advantage of this life is that bills, like sins, are slow to find you out.

At present I live in a white 'dobe house on the Nevada desert. The mountains are apparently painted on a canvas backdrop. Some day I am going to investigate this.

My typewriter fits neatly on the 'dobe porch rail of this house and I shall be very comfortable—until some friend from the East comes out to visit me and leaves a timetable lying around.

R. E. Hamilton.

THE DAY'S MAIL

EVERY now and then a reader arises and registers a kick against serial stories. But what is to be done? They are too long for a single issue and too good to pass up. I suggested to this reader that he save the issues and read all the instalments at once, as so many tell me they do.

Congratulations on your magazine, for the first year, at least. I must say that it has even exceeded my expectations, or at least what you told me to expect. Let's hope you keep up the good work. I have been a reader of EVERYBODY'S for the last five years but I must say that it is one hundred per cent better now than ever. *Square Shooters* by Sanders in the November copy is about the best in that issue.

I would like to make one suggestion, and that is about serials. Cut them out. They lose all their interest waiting for the next issue. Of course that is only my view and it might be a bit radical.

Louis Trumbull.

Some time ago a letter of most intelligent criticism appeared here. This reader commends the writer of that letter. So do I. There's nothing in the world like a little honest brick-throwing to make the editor feel at home!

Congratulations on the new magazine! I've been following trails through the Carolinas to Colorado and not one led to an EVERYBODY'S. I got home last week, and in the last few days I've swallowed copy after copy of EVERYBODY'S from June to and through November. I could read that magazine forever, I do believe, and I don't mean maybe.

I don't mind admitting, sir, that I enjoyed *Everybody's Meeting Place* as fully as much as any of the stories. A certain gentleman sort of hit you hard—seemingly. Sir, I think that frank criticism is the most admirable of all the praise I have seen in the *Meeting Place*. One who criticizes like that must have a rather different manner of thinking in the brain behind the pen.

Bud Stuart,
Baltimore, Maryland.

AROUND THE OFFICE

LINED up for the April issue are two perfectly swell novelettes by writers whom you have met before. RAYMOND S. SPEARS has a vivid story of the one-man clean-up of a Western frontier town, *The Border Line*. E. VAN LIER RIBBINK, author of *Beasts of the Bosveld* of some issues back, gives us a tale of Africa, concerning a store of ancient gold and the ranks of tall Zulu warriors who bar the way through the jungle trails. It is called *Wonder Dokters of the Zambezi*, and a fine, thrilling story it is. . . . . .Somewhat of an innovation, the second instalment of *The Secret Lagoon* will be longer than usual, and the whole novel will appear in four parts. Instead of running two serials simultaneously hereafter, only one will appear, and whenever possible will be completed in four long instalments. How does that strike you? . . . And while we're at it, how about the issue in your hands? I'd be delighted to hear.

WILLIAM CORCORAN.

THE NEWS OF NEXT MONTH

RAYMOND S. SPEARS'
New Story of
an Indomitable Man of Law
and the Last Stand
of the Bad Men

The Border Line

A Complete Western Novelette

* * *

and

Wonder Dokters of the Zambezi

by E. Van Lier Ribbink

A Complete Novelette of Darkest Rhodesia, Where the Fabled Treasures of Solomon Were Guarded by the Gleaming Assagais of the Zulu.

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Among the Short Stories

TO THE COLORS
By Ared White

A tale of the Army in the days of the Moro uprising

MASTERY
By Henry LaCossitt

A yarn of stormy feud on Southern seas

And other stories from far corners of the earth, including *Once On Mohave* by Jim Fellom, *The Breath of the Dragon* by Pollok Guiler, *The Shikari* by Reginald Campbell, and further instalments of two great serials.